

dark endings

it was poison
he bled



BEC BOTEFUHR WRITING AS USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BELLA JEWEL

DARK ENDINGS

Also by Bella Jewel

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Also By Bella Jewel

DEDICATION

**To all my OG readers,
The ones with me from the start,**

This one is for you.

Thank you xx



~*DARK ENDINGS*~



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DARK ENDINGS

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you take to make me a better person. You make this real for me; never stop giving such love and passion. You make our journey so amazing.

PROLOGUE

WILLOW



GRIEF, THEY SAY, COMES in five stages.

The first: denial; the stage where a person will continue to tell themselves they feel fine, they're going to recover easily, nothing is happening.

The second: anger; how could *I* let this happen? How could *they* let this happen? I hate everyone, they *will* pay for this.

The third: bargaining; I'll change my life, I'll fix everything, I'll change who I am just to make this better. I'll do whatever it takes, anything in the world, to make this go away.

The fourth: depression; I can't live, I can't breathe. The days are long, the nights ... longer. Nothing feels right. Everything is empty. The bottomless pit that is your stomach goes on, and on, never seeming to let up. It's like you're drowning.

The fifth: acceptance; I can't change this situation. Pure and simple. I live with it, or I choose not to live with it. Either way, it is what it is.

Right now, I'm at stage four: *depression*. I've been at stage four now for about six months. I can't seem to move past it. I lost myself when I was returned home. In the beginning, I was determined, I did everything possible to try and resolve the situation. I made calls, begged gang members, bribed people for information, and did everything in my power, at that point, to save *him*. Then I got angry—blinding rage filled me day

and night, and I couldn't move on, I couldn't stop blaming myself, and everyone else for what happened. Then came the bargaining, I tried everything to make myself feel better, to ease the pain inside. I begged, I pleaded, offered to lay down my life to ensure someone helped me, but no one did.

Nobody knew how, that's the brutal and honest truth.

Now, depression. I've lived with depression before, so it's nothing foreign to me. Oddly, I'm dealing with it better than the previous three emotions. In fact, I'm dealing with this stage quite well. I was sure when I got back that I'd crumble and fall back into my old ways, and, for a while, I did ... *until Cody*. He changed my life, he made the sun begin to shine again. He gave me a reason to live. He gave me a reason to push myself from my bed each day and put one foot in front of the other. He gave me a reason to breathe. He became my everything, and I would fight to make sure nothing ever happened to him.

Cody is my son.

I didn't know I was pregnant when I first returned. In fact, I didn't know for three months. It wasn't until I snapped out of my grief and realized it had been a while since I'd had a period. When I did the test, I sat staring at the two pink lines for over three hours. I was numb, I felt nothing. The usual 'how did this happen?' or 'how will I break the news to him?' didn't pass through my mind. I had no one to break the news to. I had no emotions. I couldn't think about anything except the tiny lines in front of me.

The two lines that would change my entire world.

Ava and Jenny were my rocks through my pregnancy. They took me to my appointments, fed me well, made sure I took my vitamins, and held me when I let everything shut down because I just couldn't take it any longer. When labor came around, they were both by my side as I welcomed Cody into the world. Cody became my sunshine. He's gorgeous and a spitting image of Jagger. His eyes are that beautiful light blue, and his hair is dark and thick. He has my lighter skin, and he is the happiest little soul I've ever met.

During my pregnancy, I couldn't cope living where I was, so we packed up everything and moved to the beach. To the ocean. To a place where I'd attempt to find myself again. I really tried, I chased down everything I could to get Jagger back, but it was of no use to me. The gang wouldn't support me; instead, they supported their bosses words. Their loyalty won out, and I was on my own with no other choice but to do as Jagger asked—run away and forget about him. I'd never forget about him, but I also knew there was no other option.

Right then, I needed to be what my son needs.

Ava and Angel had a huge falling out right before we left, because she wanted him to come with her, but he refused. He chose his gang over his girl, and it broke her heart. Not that I could blame her, but I understood Angel wasn't going to leave at a time like this. He couldn't just pack up and run. I told Ava to stay, but her mind was made up and she's more stubborn than anyone I know when she has decided something.

So, we packed up everything and moved. I haven't seen or heard from the guys since, and that alone is enough to break someone's heart, not to mention living with the daily thoughts of what could be happening to Jagger and how there isn't a single thing in the world I can do about it. That pains me, deep into my very soul, and I don't think I'll ever recover.

The images in my mind stop me from sleeping most nights, which is okay since Cody is a restless baby during the evening hours, much like his father. I lie awake more often than not, staring at the stars from my window and listening to the waves crashing against the shore. I don't even know if Jagger is still alive. That thought makes me sick, it rips down to the very core of me and eats away at it, slowly but surely.

I don't know if I'll ever be okay again.

Not without him.

He is my missing piece and, without him, I'm simply not whole.

SIX MONTHS LATER



“Hey, my little munchkin,” Ava croons, swooping down to scoop Cody up into her arms.

He smiles at her. He has this big, beautiful smile that puts sunshine back into all our lives. He’s gorgeous, everything about him is pure perfection and beauty. He’s six months old now and the happiest baby under the sun. He reaches out and clutches Ava’s necklace, and she laughs.

“No, baby, that’s Aunty Ava’s special necklace.”

Like he cares. He pops it into his mouth and drool runs down Ava’s chest.

“You’re the only man I’d let drool over me.” She frowns, but the love in her eyes tells me she doesn’t care how much he drools on her.

I watch them, and my heart warms. Ava tells me that I don’t smile the way I used to anymore but my face lights up when Cody is around. That is more than a little upsetting, because I want my son to see all the beautiful things in me, all the pieces that I’ve squashed down. I want him to know joy.

“He’s a charmer,” I say, stroking his soft, dark curls.

“Oh, he’s a charmer alright. Where’s Jen?”

Ava puts Cody on the floor and hands him a pacifier, which he drools all over and then tosses on the floor with an angry expression. Yes, he’s like his father in that sense. The boy has anger issues. He’s calm and chill until he doesn’t get his own way, and then he turns into one hell of a fighter. He’ll go head to head with me, until I either cave and give him what he wants or out stare him and force him to accept defeat.

He's strong. I love that about him.

"I don't know." I shrug. "She got a call and she rushed out. Maybe work?"

Ava nods, walking into the kitchen and pulling out a bag of grapes. She pops one into her mouth and chews, looking thoughtful. She ponders something for a minute and then leans her butt against the kitchen counter and looks to me.

"Do you think she's seeing someone?"

I've considered it. "I mean, it's possible. She's out a lot lately."

"Maybe she's calling your mom?" Ava suggests.

It's possible. My mom got released just after Jagger was taken. She wasn't too thrilled to find out we were skipping a few states as soon as she was released. I think Jenny calls her every day, just to make her believe that we weren't running from her. I've tried to tell her that too, but she doesn't want to listen to me. She's visited a few times but it's not something any of us are very comfortable with. She adores Cody, though I would never fully trust her with him. Do I feel bad about that? Sure I do, but I have reason to stand my ground with it. I've forgiven her, and we've managed to build some sort of relationship.

It's a start.

"I don't think she'd hide that she's talking to Mom," I say. "No, it's something more."

Ava contemplates this, while sucking noisily on her grape. I raise my brows at her.

"What'd the grape do to you?"

She laughs. "It tastes better smooshed and decapitated."

I scrunch my nose up. "Seriously, you're twisted."

She nods, like that doesn't even bother her. "Totally."

"How's work going?"

Ava has taken up work at a local restaurant on the water. It keeps her busy, and I know she likes to work, but she also looks like she's missing something that brings her joy, too. It saddens me that she's hurt, and I can't help but feel a little bad that she lost someone she cared about because I couldn't stay.

She smiles. "It's a good job, but it's not something I want to do forever, you know?"

I nod. "I know what you mean. At least it keeps you busy."

She nods, popping another grape into her mouth. "It does, if I don't work, I'll go crazy."

"True."

We hear a car pull up, and I turn, staring at the front door. Our house is very open, and we can see right out over the ocean. It's all white on the outside, and the inside is painted a light, breezy blue. Soft cotton curtains cover the open windows, flapping constantly with the ocean breeze. It's a very tropical little place so we picked furniture to match the beachy vibe. We are right on the sand, literally. We step out the front door and onto the beach.

The floors are all wooden, and have paintings of flowers, surfboards and ocean sunsets on the walls. The kitchen is large, with white tiled counter tops and shiny silver fittings. It's four bedrooms, and we all have one each as well as a spare. The front of the house is set out with a huge deck and white painted chairs and a swing seat that Cody loves.

It's perfect.

It's peaceful.

It's just what we needed.

"Oh ... my ... god!"

I'm snapped out of my daze when I hear Ava's voice. I turn to stare at whatever it is that has her screaming out like that, and I stop breathing. Jenny is coming up the front steps, and she's being followed by four men. I know those men. I know them nearly as well as I know myself—Ace, Angel, Rusty, and Bull. I'm numb, my legs tingle and my skin

prickles. When they step inside, I'm still standing completely blindsided by the scene before me.

I didn't think I'd see them again.

I thought they'd given up.

I had accepted they weren't in my life anymore.

"Willow ..."

Ace speaks, his voice careful, but I can't grasp the fact that he's standing in my living room. Hot, angry tears well in my eyes, and I fight them back. I haven't cried for months, I refuse to start again now. How could they come here after they left me on my own and refused to help me? They were my family, I loved them like my own brothers, and they chose to let me suffer.

To leave me alone.

"What are you doing here?"

It comes out as a harsh whisper, my voice has betrayed me and gone into hiding. Ace stares at me for long moments, his eyes narrowing at my expression, I can see the pain in his eyes, but I have no pity for him. "Kid, we wanted to help out."

"Don't call me that!" I snap, shocking myself with how harsh my voice comes out.

I cover my face and take a deep, calming breath. I can't deal with this. Not right now. I need air. I glance at Ava, who now has Cody in her arms, and knowing he's safe, I rush past them, slapping Ace's hand away when he reaches out for me. I hurry out the front door and down onto the sand. Each breath is like fire in my lungs. How could they come back and think it's all just going to be okay? Why do they want to help me now, when they wanted no part of it when I needed them the most? I walk down the long stretch of beach, just needing to get as far away from them as possible.

"Come on, Willow. Wait!" Ace's voice whips in the breeze, but I don't stop.

Moments later, a strong hand curls around my arm and swings me toward him. My hand raises and connects with his

face so hard he stumbles backward and falls onto the sand. Anger—anger that I've held in for so long—finally comes to the surface. Fury rises, and I leap on top of him, slamming my fists into his chest over and over. He grips my arms, yanking me down so he can wrap his arms around me and hold onto me so tightly I can't move.

“How could you?” I yell into his chest. “I loved you guys, I trusted you, and you all left me alone. Now you think you can just come back? How dare you, Ace?”

“I know,” he whispers, his voice hoarse. “I know what we did. We were following orders, we thought it was for the best. At that point, it was just too dangerous for you to try and save him. It would have only ended badly. We thought we were helping you out.”

“What's changed?” I snap, shoving myself off and rolling onto the sand beside him. I push up and sit, tucking my knees to my chest and burying my face in my hands. I can't wrap my mind around this, it's all too much.

“Cody.”

It's one, simple word, and yet it has me snapping my head up.

“What did you say?”

“I said Cody. He changes everything.”

“How dare you,” I whisper, my voice like steel. “You didn't want to help me, you just sent me on my way, heartbroken and alone, and now you want to help because of my son?”

“I know how it sounds,” Ace says. “Believe me, Willow. I'm fucking broken for leaving you the way we did. I honestly can't tell you how bad I feel about that. I thought I was protecting you. That world was so dangerous, and if you went back, you risked putting yourself into life as a slave, and I wasn't going to be the one to help you do that, but then Jenny rang me, and ...”

“Jenny!” I mutter. “All along you're who she was speaking to?”

He nods.

“I’ll kill her,” I mutter, but I don’t mean it.

“Listen to me, please. She called a few weeks ago and told us about Cody. She said you weren’t getting any better and that we needed to make a decision regarding Jagger. So, we did that, and we’ve decided to get him back. We found out he’s fighting in Florida this month and it all just worked out how it was meant to. That boy needs his dad, and you need him.”

I cover my face again. I’m so angry and confused. I want to punch and hug Ace at the same time. I’m so angry that it took Cody to make him see that we needed to save Jagger. I’m so hurt that I wasn’t enough and yet I’m so grateful that he’s willing to help. I also can’t believe Jagger is so close, and I might not have known about it if they hadn’t showed up.

“I wasn’t enough to help?” I say, unable to stop myself.

I meet his eyes.

Ace winces. “Kid, come on. You know I love you. We all do, but Jagger made us swear. He didn’t want you to go after him, he knew whatever Mick had planned would be bad, and he didn’t want you involved.”

“You were my friends,” I say, standing. “You were my friends and you just abandoned me. That’s not good enough, Ace. I appreciate what you’re doing now, and I get that you couldn’t help me back then, but that’s not what broke my heart. What broke my heart is that you all left me when you knew the pain I was going through. You cut contact and left me. I can’t forgive you for that.”

I turn and walk off. I stroll slowly down the long stretch of beach in front of me. Tears burn in my eyes, but I refuse to let them out. I haven’t had a real breakdown since the day I left Jagger on that island, and I won’t have one now. *I won’t*. I’m stronger than that. I’ve hardened my heart. I’ve learned how to deal with things.

As the sun begins setting, I know I have to get back. Miles and miles I’ve walked, but I can’t stay away forever. With a pained sigh, I turn and walk back toward the house. When I

get in, everyone is sitting at the dining table talking. My son is bouncing on Angel's knee. As much as that sight tugs my heart strings, I'm still too angry. I walk over and take Cody, and, without another word, I turn and leave the room.

Everyone has gone silent, like I didn't notice. I move to the bathroom and run a bath for Cody. I strip him off and put him in. He splashes and gurgles, completely oblivious. Oh, to be young and carefree again. He has no idea that his father is out there, fighting for his life. He has no idea that those men in there are dangerous. He has no idea, and it's blissful.

"Is that fun, little buddy?" I say, stroking his cheek.

He grips my finger and slides it into his mouth, drooling all over it.

"Ew," I say, sliding it out and smiling at him. He's the only one who sees me smile. "That's yucky."

He laughs and splashes, sending water flying all over me. I hear footsteps behind me, but I don't turn.

"Willow?"

It's Jenny. I don't look at her. I know why she went to the boys, but what I don't know is why she didn't bother to tell me. We're sisters, but before that we're best friends, and she lied to me. She kept something from me. I can't help the hurt that comes rising up when I think about that.

"I know you're mad at me, but I didn't know what else to do."

Her voice is soft, careful.

I turn to her. "You lied to me. They didn't want to help me, Jenny. They left me alone and didn't help me when I needed it, and now you want me to just let them in?"

"You have to let someone in," she says, her voice shaky.

Tears glisten, and I can see she's trying to fight them off.

"Why?" I whisper, fighting off my own demons.

"Because if you don't, you'll drown. You have a son, and he needs you, but you're not there."

“How dare you?” I say, feeling as though she has slapped me in the face. “He is my entire world. I do everything for him.”

“I don’t mean it in the way you think,” she says, quickly. “I mean that emotionally you’re vacant, Willow. You love him, he has everything he wants, but he’s getting older. Do you think he won’t feel the emptiness you carry around?”

“He was everything to me!” I blurt out, trembling. “He was my life and now he’s gone. Nothing any of you do can make that okay again. Life without him will never be okay. He didn’t just die, he’s out there, being tortured, and I’m here ... helpless.”

I’m shaking so hard my teeth are rattling together. I can’t breathe.

Panic is rising in my chest.

These attacks are something I’ve gotten used to, but they’re not something I handle very well. I don’t want Cody to see.

I don’t want Jenny to be right.

“Take Cody, please. Put him to bed.”

I barely manage to whisper the words before standing and stumbling out of the bathroom. I get into my room and fall to the ground. Pulling my pillow from the bed, I press it to my face and scream. I scream so loudly it hurts. Everyone wants to fix something that can’t be fixed. I can’t just make myself okay. It’s my fault Jagger is there, I let them take him. I didn’t fight hard enough to make sure he didn’t come after me.

I just can’t forgive myself for this.

A set of strong arms wrap around me, and I jerk away. I didn’t even hear someone come in. I don’t want comfort, I don’t want to break down, but I do. Tears spill over, and I begin wailing, unable to hold it back. I shake, scream, cry, and heave until there is nothing left. My body is being rocked, and I fight it. I shove and push at the hard chest pressed against my cheek. I push, but I don’t free myself. He’s too strong.

“Fight me, but I won’t let you go.”

Ace. Always Ace.

“Let me go,” I gasp. “Let me go!”

“No.”

“He was everything,” I whisper, defeated. “He broke me.”

“I know, and we’re going to get him back.”

“It’s my fault. I should have done something, anything to stop it. If it wasn’t for me, he wouldn’t be there.”

“No, you’re wrong. Jagger was in this mess long before you. Mick had plans for him since the day he was born.”

“What if we’re too late, what if he’s dead?”

“He’s not dead.”

I jerk my head back and stare up at him. “How do you know?”

“You have to trust me.”

“Does ... Does he know about Cody?”

Ace shakes his head. “No.”

“Ace, I know why you’re here, but I don’t think there’s anything we can do. You all told me that there was no way out of this. Those words came from your mouth.”

“I know we said that, and I believed it, but I think we might have a chance here.”

A small amount of hope peeks its head out. Do we have a chance? Can we fix what was broken? Will my son get his father back?

“I can’t ask how right now, I can’t ... I have nothing left.”

Ace lifts me in his arms and lays me down onto the bed. Then he surprises me by crawling in next to me and wrapping his arms around me, pulling me close. For a moment, my entire body freezes, and I feel like I’m doing something wrong, yet at the same time the comfort he’s bringing me is something I’m struggling to fight off.

“What are you doing?” I whisper.

“I fucked up. I left you when you had no one else. I should’ve never done that. I should’ve been there for you. I should’ve sat with you when you grieved, I should’ve been there when you had Jagger’s son, and I wasn’t. None of us were. So, the best I can do right now is promise you that we’re going to be here, no matter what happens. If we can’t get Jagger, we will be in yours and Cody’s lives. I owe you both that, and it’s what Jagger would want. Right now, though, I’m going to hold you because I know sometimes loneliness can be the darkest of feelings, and, above all else, you deserve one night without feeling that soul crushing emptiness that I know you’ve lived with since he went.”

I sink into Ace, and he’s right, I’ve been so lonely. The comfort of his arms around me brings some warmth back to my heart. I’ve been so alone in my battle without Jagger. That’s not to say Jenny and Ava haven’t been amazing because they have, but sometimes it’s just not enough. I feel my breathing beginning to even out, and soon I’m falling asleep. That’s something I haven’t done properly for a long, long while.

I’ll take it while I can.



I WAKE TO THE SOUND of my son’s gurgling. I shift, and the hot, hard body behind mine groans and rolls. Ace stayed with me all night, just like he said he would. I blink a few times, letting my eyes adjust to the morning sunshine flowing through the window. I sit up stiffly and peer over at Cody’s crib. I didn’t hear Jenny put him to bed, I must have passed out. He’s sitting up, shaking a rattle and gurgling to himself. Always the happy camper. I smile over at him, and, today, it feels a little less heavy.

“He’s a noisy little champ,” Ace says, sitting up beside me.

I stare over at him and realize he’s got no shirt on. Heat swells in my cheeks, not because I’m attracted to him, but because the entire situation just feels like I’m doing something

wrong. Ace is gorgeous, but my heart belongs to Jagger, and he knows that. Is it truly a bad thing to let him make me feel a little better?

“I won’t bite,” Ace murmurs. “I swear. I’m not here to try and take you.”

I roll my eyes at him. “Yeah, I know.”

“Do you?”

I can’t help but smile. “Of course, I’m out of bounds to all you guys. Don’t worry Ace, I won’t get horny enough to try and jump you. You’re not my type.”

He pouts like he’s offended. I smile for real now.

“Stop it,” I tease.

He looks over at Cody. “Don’t worry, I’d never try anything on you. I’d be in an early grave if I did.”

We both stare at Cody, who’s now looking over at us expectantly. No doubt wondering why the hell we haven’t come and gotten him out of his crib. He’s an amazing sleeper, which I’m thankful for. A bottle before bed and he’s out until the morning light. Such a calm, relaxed soul.

Sometimes, that is.

“He’s just like him,” Ace murmurs.

I nod, swallowing. “Yeah, he is.”

“Jagger would be proud of him, god, he always wanted to be a dad.”

“I hope he will get the chance to be.”

Ace gets out of bed and stretches, then leans down and fetches his shirt, sliding it on. He walks over to the crib and lifts Cody out. Cody squeals and grips the chain around Ace’s neck and tugs. His smile is huge as he gets to know the man that, just yesterday, was a perfect stranger.

“Tough little sucker, aren’t ya?” Ace laughs.

“He likes necklaces.”

“We’ll have to get you a hardcore necklace then, little buddy, won’t we?”

Cody drools in response. I slide out of bed and stretch. My body is aching from the pressure release last night. Crying is good like that. It’s good for the soul and all that bullshit. Whatever, it worked. Today is the first day in quite some time where I feel a glimpse of hope, like maybe, just maybe, things won’t be so bad.

“Hey, Ace?”

Ace turns and glances at me. “Yeah?”

“Thanks, for last night ...”

He nods. “Anytime, kid. Now come on, we’ve got a lot to discuss.”

I nod. “I’ll shower and be out. Are you okay to take him out?”

“Sure, we’ll go and drool on the other guys, won’t we, little man?”

Cody smiles that toothless smile and Ace laughs.

“Just like your dad you are, it’s scary.”

I walk over and kiss Cody. “Be nice to the big bad men, cutie.”

Ace rolls his eyes at me, and then disappears out of the room. A moment later Jenny walks in, her expression carefully blank. I feel bad for getting so angry at her last night, I guess I just reached that breaking point. I honestly couldn’t think clearly, and I took it out on her when she was only trying to help.

“Hey ...”

I smile. “Hey.”

“Ace stayed with you?”

“Yeah, but don’t worry, he was just being a friend. I’m grateful to him for that.”

She smiles. “Me too. Willow, I’m sorry ...”

I put my hand up. “I know what you were doing, Jen, and you were right. I’m drowning without Jagger, and if I don’t at least try to help him then I will never forgive myself. You did a good thing, I’m sorry I got so angry at you.”

She smiles weakly. “I don’t want to see you sinking, Willow. I couldn’t bear it.”

“Thank you for saving me, yet again.”

She smiles and steps forward, pulling me into a hug. We stand, holding each other for long moments before pulling back. I sigh and stare at the door, I know what I have to face today, I just don’t know how I’ll do it. Time to pull those big girl panties on and deal with this head on, I guess.

“Time to face the music,” I murmur.

“Do you think we have a chance of finding Jagger?”

“I hope so, I truly do.”

She nods, her expression is pained. “I hope so, too. I’ll leave you to shower. See you soon.”

When she’s gone, I walk into my shower and stare in the mirror. Not much has changed about me, except the light in my eyes is gone. I know what I’m missing, it’s happiness. I find it quite interesting how important happiness truly is. People say they can live without it, so long as they’re living. But what’s living without happiness? It’s an empty, vacant world with no joy. I don’t want that world.

I get into the shower and sigh as the warm water eases my aching muscles. When I’m done, I get out and pull a towel off the rack before walking out and digging through my closet. I pick a pair of cotton shorts and a black singlet top. I pull a brush through my hair and then tie it up messily before walking out to join the others.

When I step out, I let my eyes scan the four men at the table. Aside from Ace, I haven’t spoken to any of them. I take in their attractive faces and grim expressions. Nothing has changed. They’re still the same as always. Angel stands when he sees me, and surprises me by coming over and pulling me into his arms. His lips land on my forehead and stay there as

though he's breathing me in. I wrap my arms around him. I've missed him, I can't deny that.

"I'm sorry. It don't mean shit, I know, but we abandoned you, and we shouldn't have."

I shrug and look up at him. "It's done now, all I care about is getting him home."

"We're going to do everything we can."

I nod and hug him again, before being pulled into Bull's arms, and then Rusty's. Once we have moved past that, I walk into the kitchen where Ace is taking some ingredients out of the fridge to make breakfast. Cody is in his swing gurgling, so I make him a bottle and hand it to him. Then I go back into the kitchen to help Ace.

"What're you making?" I ask.

"Omelet," he says, smiling.

"Can I help?"

"Yeah, sure."

He hands me some peppers, and I begin slicing them. Jenny comes into the kitchen and wraps her arms around Ace's middle. My eyes bulge as I stare at the two of them. They're together? Since when? Why didn't they tell me? Jenny notices my expression and lets Ace go. Her eyes flash with guilt, and it takes me a minute to gather myself.

"We were going to tell you ..."

I swallow. Emotions begin swirling in the pit of my stomach, ones I truly don't understand. I am happy for Jenny, heck, I'm happy for Ava who is curled up on Angel's lap as if no time had passed between them. I'm happy they're happy. I can't control the overwhelming urge to cry, because, for the first time, I'm the one sitting alone with no one. My vision blurs, and I can't seem to get myself together. I need to run; I need to go for a long, hard run and clear my head.

I taught myself how to run as a way of coping, and, so far, it has been the only thing to help when things get too much.

I'm sick of taking my emotions out on other people, it's not fair.

"Willow, we're sorry," Jenny says softly.

I force a smile, even though my eyes are filled with tears. "I'm happy for you guys, truly I am ... I just ... all of this is really overwhelming."

"I know," Ace says, nodding.


"I'm going to take Cody for a run. I'll be back soon, and we can talk."

I turn and rush out of the kitchen, scooping Cody into my arms, and then I walk out without another word. I don't know what to say, but I know I don't want to be the one that rains on their parade. They deserve happiness, and there's no way in hell I'm going to be the one to take that away from them.

I've already taken so much from them.

They deserve this.

They truly do.



When I'm back from my run, I put Cody down for his morning nap. I am just about to walk out and join everyone when my phone rings. Looking down, I see it's my mother. Marvelous. I haven't spoken to her for a while, and I know that I need to, but it's still awkward at times, and it can be difficult to have a conversation with her and not get into an argument. I pick up the phone anyway.

Trying to be the good daughter and all that.

"Hi, Mom."

"Willow, I've been calling for a few days. Where have you been?"

"Busy, sorry," I lie. "How are you, Mom?"

"Well," she says excitedly, "I was hoping to come and visit."

Guilt slams into my chest. I know I should be excited, hell, I should tell her she can come because she's making the effort, but every time she's here ... we all just end up fighting. I can't handle that right now. Not with everything that's going on.

"I love that you want to visit us, but now's not a good time."

"It's never a good time!" she mutters, her voice going from happy to bitter in a matter of seconds.

"It's not like that," I exhale. "I honestly have so much going on right now."

"I want to see my daughters and my grandson. I don't know why I can't come out and see you."

I grit my teeth, fighting for calm. "You can come out and see me, Mom, but if the last few visits are anything to go by,

we just end up fighting, and I can't handle that right now. It's not personal, as I said, there is a lot going on."

"When are we going to move past this?" she says, her voice clipped.

"Mom ..."

"You refuse to let me in, I'm trying so hard. I'm better now, and I'm trying, but you just up and move away from me, without even giving me a chance."

"You know why I moved away!" I pathetically say, a poor attempt at defending myself.

"You say it's because of him, but I know the real reason. You don't want to forgive me. I don't know what I have to do."

"Please, it's not you. I can't deal with this right now."

"When can I come and visit?" she pushes.

"I'll call you when things settle down, I promise."

She laughs, bitterly. "Why don't I believe that?"

Keep it together, Willow.

"I promise that you can come and visit, or maybe soon I'll come and visit you."

She brightens just a touch. "That would be nice."

"I have to go. I'll call you, I promise."

"Okay. I love you."

I close my eyes and sigh. "You too, Mom, bye."

I hang up and then make my way out to join everyone on the wrap-around deck. It's time to get to business. I don't even know where to start, but I'm hoping they do. Ace scoots over and makes room for me on the swing chair, so I sit down beside him. He's holding Jenny's hand, but he reaches out and takes mine, too. I'm grateful for that.

"Okay, so we've decided to help Jagger," Angel begins. "What we need to do is have a secure plan in place. It's not going to be easy. The show Mick is running is large, as you all

know, and if we make one mistake, it could go very wrong, for all of us.”

“Is he still running the island?” I ask.

Angel nods. “Yes, but that isn’t really a concern at the moment. Jagger has fights in Florida this month, but the problem is finding a contact in the fighting world that’s going to get us near enough to be able to get in. Even if we make a bet, we can’t get in. It’s very strict. Available to the upper-class, hand selected few only.”

“Yeah, it’s not going to be easy. When we get a contact, we need to somehow try and get word to Jagger. If he doesn’t know what we plan on doing, it could ruin this plan entirely,” Ace adds. “It would help if he knew what was coming.”

“How are we going to get him out without someone coming after us?” I question. “Mick isn’t going to just forget Jagger and move on because we decide to take him.”

The men all look at each other and then Ace squeezes my hand and says, “We have a plan.”

I narrow my eyes. “What kind of plan?”

“It’s safer if you don’t know ...”

Heart racing, I whisper, “You’re going to kill him.”

Nobody says anything, which is answer enough.

“Don’t worry about that part of it,” Angel goes on, trying to change the subject, “you just worry about getting Jagger home.”

“Mick is only one person; if you kill him, that island is still running,” Jenny says, shaking her head. “It’ll never end.”

“That’s why we’re going to blow it up,” Bull mutters, as if he didn’t just say what he did.

“What?” I gasp, eyes wide.

“Fuck it, Bull,” Angel growls.

Bull shrugs. “She’s goin’ to find out.”

“You can’t just blow it up,” I say, shaking my head. “All those women ... They don’t deserve to die. Not to mention it’s far too guarded, you’d never get in.”

“That’s why we need Jagger, he goes back and forth. He can slowly begin planting explosives, and, before we do anything, we’ll find a way to get those women off. That’s where we will need you also. We will need locations of the halls, where they eat, things like that. We want them all in one place when we go in.”

“It’s dangerous,” Ava whispers.

“It is, but if we don’t end it, I assure you it’ll get worse,” Angel says to her.

“I agree with Angel,” I reluctantly say. “I saw that place, and I wouldn’t wish that on my worst enemy. As much as I don’t like this idea, it does need to end. How are you going to get the coordinates again?”

Angel looks at Ace and then says, “Huck.”

“Huck? Why does he keep coming into this?”

“He was with your dad a lot, and they worked on the case; he’s got the information we need.”

“Okay, so we get Huck on board. What else?” I ask.

We sit discussing our next move when an idea springs to my mind. I never thought of it before because I thought he was dead, but he could be the missing piece in this confusing puzzle.

“Danny,” I say.

All heads turn to stare at me.

“What?” Angel says. “As in the guy Jagger beat, your ex?”

“We need to find him.”

Ace raises his brows. “What? Why?”

“Why? Because Danny’s a fighter. He has access to all the fighting rings.”

Angel rubs his chin. “How will we get him to cooperate? He didn’t exactly like you, Willow. Not to mention Jagger did a number on him.”

“Money,” I say simply. “Danny will do anything for money, it’s why he fights.”

“How do we come up with enough?” Jenny asks.

“Easy.” I shrug. “Jagger left me his accounts. He has enough to offer some to Danny. It could work.”

Ace nods and looks to Angel for confirmation.

“Alright,” Angel says. “I think that could work, our next problem is finding him.”

“I can do that, I know some of his friends.” I say.

“Okay, so what about when we get the information. How do we get into the fights to speak with Jagger?” Jenny says. “One look at any of us and Mick will know.”

“Disguise,” Ava says, as though it’s a no-brainer.

“It’d have to be a damn good disguise,” Bull mutters.

Ava grins. “I’m the master of disguise. I can make Willow look completely different.”

“How will she get in though?” Jenny asks.

“With Danny,” I mutter. “I’ll have to look like I’m with him.”

Angel nods, smiling slightly. “That could actually work. Ava, I want you to show me what you can do with Willow later. I want to see if she’s recognizable.”

“Why are we sending Willow in?” Bull asks. “It’s dangerous.”

Angel stares him right in the eye. “Because she’s the only one who has a chance of getting Jagger to listen.”

Everyone nods and falls silent for a long moment. Ace squeezes my hand, and I look over at him.

“Are you ready for this?” he asks.

“I’d lay my life down for him, Ace.”

“Don’t forget you have a son now, if we think it’s getting too dangerous, we’ll pull you out.”

I nod. “If it gets too dangerous, I’ll pull myself out. For my son’s sake, I have to know when to stop.”

Everyone nods again, and I stand. “I’m starving, so I’m going to get something for lunch. I’ll stop by the store and get more food for us all.”

Before I can say another word, a wad of cash is shoved in my face. All the men have opened their wallets and handed me money.

Angel laughs, when he sees my wide-eyed expression. “We won’t stay without helpin’ out.”

I can’t help the small laugh that escapes my lips. “Thanks.”

I tuck the cash into my pocket and then get a list of everything they might need or want. Then I collect Cody when he wakes and head to the store. All I can think about is our plan the entire time I shop, praying it’ll actually work.

I don’t want to hope, I really don’t, but it’s hard not to.

This could get Jagger back, it could bring him home.

There is one thing that scares me, though.

It has been a long time ... What if he isn’t the same man I remember?

Am I risking it all to bring home a man who is no longer the one I fell in love with?

JAGGER



Blood spurts from my mouth as my opponent lands a punch. Mother fucker. That little prick is quick. He's not big, but he's speedy. I duck the next punch and drive my own bruised and battered fist into his jaw. I hear the booming crack as he stumbles backward and trips; his head lands on the ground and bounces. Mick stands over him and counts it down. I'm panting, sweat sliding down my forehead, but I don't move my eyes from the man lying on the ground. One second of looking away and he could be up and on me.

When he doesn't move, Mick takes my hand and announces me as the winner. *Again*. I have my suspicions that Mick purposely picks weak opponents to ensure I win every time. Either way, I don't fucking care. I haven't cared since the day he got hold of me. The crowd roars and cheers my name, but I don't give them a second glance as I turn and exit the fighting ring. I slip out back, and Sharleen rushes over. She hands me a wet towel and a bottle of water. I swig the water back and then spit it out onto the floor.

Blood-tinged liquid stains the already dark red concrete.

"Good fight, son, well done," Mick says, coming into the room, his smile big, his chest puffed out.

It's all money for him.

Big money. The biggest.

I nod. He narrows his eyes.

"Do you need to rest before your next fight?" Sharleen asks.

I glare at her. I can't stand her. She knows it, I know it, Mick knows it, but that doesn't stop her from attempting to

crawl back into my good books. “Do I look like I need to fuckin’ rest, Sharleen?”

“Don’t speak to her like that, boy, she’s doin’ what I’m tellin’ her to. If you fall, it’s on her.”

I spin on the man who brought me into this world, and it takes everything in me not to kill him. I dream of it, I fucking *crave* it. Once he might have been able to drop me on my ass but now? Now I’m pumped full of steroids and twice the size I was before. I fucking hate him for that almost as much as I hate him for bringing me here.

One day, I’ll have his blood.

I vow it.

“Don’t tell me who I will and won’t speak to. I’ll do what I fuckin’ want, and if you’ve got a problem with it, then I’ll leave and you can find someone else to play your fuckin’ sick games.”

“You leave,” Mick snarls, “and I go and get Willow and fuck her until she can’t move. Then I’ll let everyone else fuck her. Then I’ll let you watch as I slowly kill her in front of you.”

I see red.

My fist moves before my brain kicks in and connects with Mick’s mouth. Sharleen screams. Mick stumbles backward gripping his jaw and panting with rage. I’m panting an equal amount, but I want him to fight me. I want him to hurt me. I want him to try so I can give it back.

“You shut your fuckin’ mouth,” I warn.

Mick steps forward, smirking, his fingers rubbing over his jaw. “Punch me all you like, you’re under the chain here, and you know it. You leave, she’s dead. Well, fucked, then dead. You try and get rid of me, I’ve got back up. I’ve got so much back up your little woman will never be safe, even if I’m not here.”

I raise my hand again, but he grips it in his large one and squeezes. My fingers bend and crunch together. I grit my teeth,

but I don't let him see any kind of pain. I lock eyes with him and hold until he pulls on my fist, leaning in closer.

“Hit me again, boy, you won't like it.”

“Speak about her again,” I spit, “and you won't like it either.”

“Get back out there and finish this. We'll talk later.”

“No,” I say, turning, “we won't. I'm done tonight.”

“We've got another fight, Jagger!” Mick roars.

“I don't give a fuck.”

I lean down and take the shirt sitting on the silver bench. Then, throwing it over my shoulder, I walk out, leaving him to scream and snarl curses at me. Good, let him. I couldn't care less. I step out into the fresh night air and stroll briskly down the street. Florida. We've done three fights here, and I have another two before we go elsewhere. I'm sick of traveling, I'm sick of broken bones, split lips, and pain. I'm always in fucking pain. I'd do it all over again though, for her. I'd do anything for her, and that's why I'm here.

I think about her every day. I can never get the image of her being dragged away from my mind. I don't know where she is. I don't know if she's okay. Last time I spoke to the boys was the day I left to go find her on that island. I told them if they came after me, I would end them, and they knew I meant it. I told them to keep her away from me. Tore my fuckin' heart out but I know her, I know she would have come after me if she thought there was a chance.

There isn't a chance.

While Mick is around, there's never a chance. I've thought of killing him, but it goes far deeper than just him, and he's made that loud and clear. It's a massive group of people all willing to defend him. I'd have to take out the lot and even I'm not that good. I haven't spoken to Maggie in months—I know she's worried, and I can only hope Willow has explained things to her.

Willow, God, she fuckin' breaks my heart. She's on my mind every second of every hellish long day. I broke her, and I know she's suffering. I can't fix her. I can't see her. I can never love her again, and that's enough to break me. Fighting is the only way to keep on track, it's a way to channel my anger and, for that, I'm grateful. I'd do anything to make sure she's safe, and if it means giving my entire life, I will.

I step into a local bar just down the road from the fighting ring. It's packed, so I find a seat and order a drink. It won't be long before Mick finds me, he doesn't like me being out in public. Guarantee he already has eyes on me. People swarm around me, chatting, dancing, and flirting. I look down at my beer and try to keep the thoughts from drowning me. The bar attendant pulls up a stool and stares over the bar at me, his eyes scan my face. He's old and bald, but he has kind eyes.

He shoves another beer my way.

"You look like you need it, son."

"Thanks," I mutter.

"Tough night?"

"Tough life."

"That good, hey? Wanna tell me about it? I hear it helps."

I raise a brow. "I doubt it would, but thanks."

"You look like you got a busted lip there, needs stitches that does."

I touch my split lip and wince. Well fuck, more stitches. Half the time I don't bother, it isn't worth it considering I'll just end up with more the following day, or week, or month. I leave it most of the time, resulting in more than one infection and deep scar. What do I care? I'm not here to impress anyone. I'm here until I die, that's the entirety of it.

I grunt in response and drop my hand. I ignore the blood that smears on the beer bottle, and bring it to my lips again anyway.

"Fighter?"

“Something like that.”

He nods, rubbing his chin. “Well, son, I hope it gets better for you.”

If only it were that simple.

If fuckin’ only.



WILLOW



“I think we’ve got the information we need,” Angel says.

I’ve just walked out early in the morning, in my cotton pants, an oversized shirt, and some serious sleepy eyes when he’s in my face. I rub the sleep from my vision and blink at him. His hair is messy, but his eyes are filled with hope, and I hate staring at them, because it gives me hope, and hope is something I don’t want to allow myself to have.

“Good morning, Angel.”

“Did you hear me?”

“I did but being that I have barely been awake two minutes, I don’t think I processed it or maybe I don’t want to process it because I’m in some sort of denial.”

“I found a way to contact him.”

That wakes me up. I stare at him, heart leaping in my chest, skin prickling.

“What?”

He smirks. “Now I’ve got your attention.”

“Spit it out, Angel.”

“Okay, so, everyone who puts massive bets on the fights, goes through Mick. It’s the club law. He runs everything. He handles everything. The twist is, Mick then has Jagger follow those men out into the dark and ... sort them out.”

Say what?

“Excuse me? I don’t think I got that right.”

“You got it right. Mick makes his money because he cashes in their bets when Jagger wins. He not only gets his own money, he gets all theirs too. It’s a good system, really. Jagger is sent to make sure those men don’t come back, if you

know what I mean? In fights like that, police don't get involved. It's a gang war basically and people show up dead all the time. It's easy enough to get away with."

"Okay, let me get this straight. Mick takes all the bets, then he sends Jagger out to kill them so he can cash the money they're supposed to win?"

"That's it, except I don't think Jagger kills them. Some he just ... scares off. Mick has ways of making things like that happen, and he wouldn't do it for all of them, just the guys with the big money, or the people from out of town."

"Okay," I mutter, still confused. "But how does this involve seeing Jagger?"

Angel smirks. "We're going to make a bet."

I raise my brows. "We're going to bet? I thought you said it was only open to certain people?"

"If it's enough cash, Mick will take notice."

"It's dangerous," Ace says, appearing in the kitchen with Jenny by his side.

"How long you been listenin' in?" Angel asks him.

"Long enough to know it's a bad idea."

"It's the only one we've got," Angel says. "Now, let's see if we can disguise Willow enough for her not to be noticed. I'll make breakfast."

Hesitantly, I go and get Cody out of his crib, feed him, and put him in his playpen. Then, I shower and take a seat so Ava and Jenny can get to work at trying to change my look. Apparently, judging by the arguments happening between Angel and Ace, they think it's best for me to go in, make a bet, and hopefully when Jagger comes after me, manage to speak with him before he plugs me with a bullet. *Solid.*

"What if he shoots before she gets a chance to speak?" Ace snaps.

"Jagger won't just shoot in a public area, he'll follow," Angel growls.

“It’s risky.”

Angel’s jaw clenches. “I know that, but it’s Willow’s choice and right now, it’s our best option.”

I stare at the two of them as Jenny pulls a lock of my hair a little too firmly. I yelp and slap her hand away, to which she responds by poking my head with a pin.

“Ouch, Jenny, are you trying to kill me?”

“Sorry,” she says, clearly trying to smother a laugh.

“Willow,” Angel says, ignoring our female attacks, “if you don’t want to do this, I will not make you.”

“I have to do it, Angel. I have to see him.”

“It’s risky, Mick might recognize you.”

“We’ll see how this disguise looks before we do any more worrying,” I say in a reassuring voice.

Though I’m not reassured, I’m far from it, actually. I’m terrified, and I don’t know that this plan will work. Still, I have no other choice but to trust them. It’s the best I’ve got.

The two men excuse themselves and walk outside, no doubt to argue some more. Jenny and Ava continue to poke, prod, pinch, and cover me in loads of makeup. When they’re done, they both stand in front of me with wide grins. I guess that’s a success.

“You look totally hot as a blonde.” Ava winks, fluffing out the beautiful wig she just pulled on.

I stand and reach out to take the mirror Jenny hands me. When I look into it, I gasp. Holy sweet mother, that’s not me. My eyes are now blue, thanks to contacts, and my hair is platinum blonde. The wig is real human hair, and it looks amazing. I am decked out with makeup, and I honestly wouldn’t recognize myself if I didn’t know it was me. Angel and Ace walk in the door, and I spin around to face them. They stop dead in their tracks.

“Holy shit!” Angel barks, jumping back.

“Fuck,” Ace mumbles.

“I believe that’s a success.” Ava grins, clapping her hands together.

“I wouldn’t recognize you on the street, no way in hell,” Angel breathes.

“You’re a hot blonde!” Ace smirks, and Jenny slaps his arm.

“Okay,” I say, stomach twisting, “so, are we doing this?”

“I guess we are. Tonight. Sit with me, Willow. We have a lot to go over.”

Ace pulls out a chair and Angel points toward it. I sit down, and Angel sits across from me. His blue eyes meet mine, and we stare at each other for long moments before he speaks.

“Okay, Mick takes bets tonight at seven. I’ve had Huck get me a contact to book you in. You go and see him, hand the money over and leave. You play it cool, I’ll tell you exactly what to say. It’ll be a big bet, enough to get you noticed. But you keep your cool, pay it, and leave. Then you walk out into the parking lot, and Jagger will be following you. It is absolutely essential that you keep your cool until you’re far away from the building. When you get down onto the sand, Jagger will no doubt make his move. It’s set out well, really. There are rocks at the far end, and all it would take is someone to slip the wrong way. It’s dark, quiet, and no one would know any better. This part of the beach is secluded and privately owned. No one will see or hear anything. So, you’re going to need to have a sure-fire way to get his attention.”

I close my eyes for a long moment. If this goes wrong, I could lose my son. I am so torn. I either forget Jagger and move on, or I risk helping him and risk my own life. The idea of living without Jagger breaks me, but the idea of losing my life and my son being alone breaks me even more. I wish this were easy, I wish I could just fix this, but I can’t.

“What about Cody?” I whisper. “What if something happens to me?”

Angel touches my hand. “That’s why we need a way to get Jagger’s attention before he does anything.”

“It’s not Jagger I’m worried about, it’s something else going wrong ...”

“We’re covering everything we can to keep you as safe as possible,” Angel assures me.

“If I die ...”

Ace is beside me now, gripping my face in his rough hands. “We’re not goin’ to let you die, we’ll be there, with eyes on you the whole time.”

That does make me feel a little better, but I can’t shake the unease about this whole situation.

“I can’t live with myself if I don’t try to help him, but the fear for my son is huge. It’s eating away at me.”

Angel nods. “I know, and if you want to pull out you just say the word.”

“I’m the only one that can do this, and you all know it, or you wouldn’t have asked,” I say.

“Maybe so, but we respect your decision, either way it goes.”

“I have to help him ...”

“We’ll pull you back if it gets too dangerous, I promise you,” Ace says, squeezing my shoulder.

“Here’s hoping he’ll see me and we’ll run off into the sunset together. I can only dream, right?”

We all laugh.

But truthfully, this isn’t a laughing matter.

It’s life or death.



It's a cool night, the wind tickles my face as I walk toward the large brick home a few yards away. It's the only house for miles. I drove my car to the entrance and walked the rest of the way. The driveway is long and gravelly, and I can hear the ocean whipping against the shore just a few yards away. I imagine during the day this place is beautiful, secluded, and well hidden away for people like Mick.

I'm taking long, deep breaths to try and stop my heart from pounding. If I make one little mistake, this is over, not just for me but for Jagger too. Thinking about seeing Jagger again has been on my mind all day. I know how I'll react. I don't know what he'll look like. What he'll act like. I just don't know how this is going to go. I'm scared. What if he's angry? Or worse, what if he refuses to come with me?

Where does that leave me?

With trembling hands, I reach the front door and knock. God, what if Mick recognizes me? What if he knows who I am right from the word go and this is all for nothing? Maybe this was a bad idea, maybe I should have let Jenny or Ava do this. I have a son. What was I thinking? Just as I'm about to turn away, the door opens and I'm faced with a man I haven't seen since the island. *Mick*.

Not a single thing has changed about him. His eyes, his face, his body. He's still as scarily handsome as he was and still just as cold. I can see it in his eyes. He narrows his gaze a moment, and I'm sure he has found me out. Heart racing, I keep my calm. Instead of raising a gun to my head though, he nods and a grin spreads across his face. The terrifying thing about that grin is that he's not looking at me like he wants to take me home, he's looking at me like he wants to take me to the island.

Sick bastard.

“Well, you must be Elise?”

“Yes,” I say in a strong British accent. I can thank my school drama classes for acing this one. “I am. Are you Mick?”

“Yes, little lady. I am.”

“Good,” I say, waving a hand casually, “then can we get this over and done with? I have plans.”

He raises a brow. I don't flinch. Don't move my gaze from his. I cross my arms, tip my head to the side and stare at him expectantly.

“You're betting for the fight on Saturday night? Am I correct?”

“Yes.”

“How much?”

“Ten thousand dollars.”

His eyes widen and he straightens.

“Is this some sort of joke?”

I straighten, too. “Why would it be a joke? Is this not what you do? I heard your guy is the best, are you telling me my money would be wasted?”

My voice doesn't waver.

Mick rubs his chin, narrowing his eyes. Even though on the outside, I'm calm and collected, on the inside I'm screaming. When he leans his heavy frame against the wooden door, I panic that he's going to say no and send me on my way with a bullet in my back.

“How do you know about my son?”

His son?

God, disgusting human. How dare he call Jagger his son? He's not a father, he'll never be a father, it's a disgrace.

I pause, because we didn't anticipate he'd ask so many questions after I presented my offer.

I think quickly, praying my answer works.

"Danny," I shrug. "He told me it was worth my time."

Mick grunts. "What's a pretty lady like you running around with scum like him?"

I give him a cold smile. "I'm here for the same reasons you are. Money."

"Fine." Mick shrugs. "You want to give over your money, that's up to you. I take the cash, when the fights are won, I deliver the proceeds to the winners. If the fight is lost, the proceeds remain with the club."

Lying piece of shit.

The proceeds remain with the club no matter the outcome.

I shrug again. "Fine by me."

"Very well, hand it over."

I dig through my bag and hand over a bundle of cash. Mick counts it, and my nerves grow as he flips every bill, calculating it all in his head. When he's satisfied, he stands straight and smiles, it's that sick smile I remember so well.

"Very well, Elise, you'll hear from me."

"I'll be watching the fight, so don't you try to fuck me over."

His brows rise again. "Now why would I do that?"

I give him a cold smile. "I know men like you. Consider yourself warned, good day."

I turn on my heel and walk off into the darkness. When I hear the front door of the house close, I sag against the closest tree and suck in a long, deep breath. I did it, I did it, and he didn't recognize me. When I hear the door open again, I push off the tree and quickly stride down the long driveway. Is it Jagger? Someone else? What if he doesn't send Jagger after

me? What if he sends someone else and this plan backfires? Suddenly, terrified, I pick up the pace.

I rush into the darkness and instead of going to my car, I go down onto the sand, as planned. When I feel my shoes hit the sand, I reach down and toss them off so I can run faster. I can hear footsteps behind me, so I pick up the pace. Angel said to get to the rocks. Every second I rush toward those rocks, I wonder if a gun will sound out and take me down. The footsteps behind me grow quicker, and I know I have only seconds left. I have to do this now. I stop when I hear a gun being cocked, my entire body freezing.

“It’s me. Jagger.”

My voice comes out croaky, and I can’t seem to get my body to move. I’m praying it’s him, because if it isn’t, I’m about to die.

“Willow?”

It’s a rasp, a deep, scratchy rasp, but I know that voice. I hear it every night in my dreams. Relief floods me, and I feel my legs threaten to give way. I can’t see him, but I can hear him approach. I turn slowly.

“Willow?”

“Jagger ...” I whisper, tears burning under my eyelids.

I can’t see him in the darkness, and oh god, I want to. I step forward until I can hear his breathing. He’s so close. All this time all I have wanted was him, and now he’s so close, and I’m speechless. I don’t know if I can reach out and touch him, or if I should just stand here and try to explain. I step forward and slam directly into his chest. Hot tears burst forth and stream down my face when I breathe him in.

My cheek is pressing against his chest, and I can hear his heart pounding. My body is molded against the hard plains of his, but he’s not touching me. He’s not speaking. He’s not doing anything at all. He’s just standing there like a statue. Our bodies are squashed, and yet I have never felt such distance between us.

Why isn’t he moving?

I lift my head and bump into him. His head is lowered. Like someone in mourning. I reach up and go to stroke his cheek, but his hand lashes out and stops me. He grips it so tightly I yelp. I hear him suck in a deep, ragged breath. It's like he doesn't believe I'm real.

“Jagger ...”

“Why?” he rasps. “Why the fuck are you here?”

All the things I could have imagined him saying, that isn't it.

“We ... I came to get you, to bring you home. Jagger, we want to help you.”

“No.”

“Jagger ...”

He shoves me backward, and I lose my footing, landing in the sand with a thump. It hurts, but the pure raw pain that rushes through my heart hurts a whole lot more.

“Leave,” he says in a voice so void of emotion it burns me to my core. “Don't come back. Don't try anything. Don't involve yourself. Go to the boys, tell them to stay the fuck out of my life. That goes for you, too. If I see you back here ...”

His voice trails off for a long moment, and it's like he can't bring himself to say the next words, but, eventually, he does, and they shock me to my core.

“If I see you back here, I'll kill you.”

“Jagger,” I whisper, not believing what he's saying, not processing it.

“I don't want you here. I don't want to go home. Leave. Do you hear me? Leave!”

Tears stream down my face. “You don't mean that. We can help you.”

“*I don't want your help,*” he roars, and I flinch at the sound. “I don't want it. I want you to fucking leave. We're done. I don't want you. I moved on. This is my life now!”

I force myself to my feet, and I feel my knees buckle. He doesn't mean it, I know he doesn't mean it.

“Jagger, I know this isn't what you want ...”

“Walk away now, or I'll shoot you.”

No. This isn't real.

He doesn't mean it.

“Jagger ... you don't ...”

“Five ...”

“Jagger ...” I gasp, certain he'd never hurt me but beginning to doubt if I know this man any longer.

“Four ...”

“Please ...”

“Three ...”

“You won't hurt me, and I'm not leaving,” I cry out.

“I fuckin' will, now leave,” he bellows.

I turn and run. I stumble over, and my hands land in the grainy sand. I cry out, agony bursting through my chest, and I whimper as I get to my feet and stagger forward. His voice echoes in my mind as tears roll down my cheeks. He was going to shoot me. He was actually going to shoot me.

He would end my life?

The man I love would end my life?

Nothing could ever hurt like this.

Nothing.



JAGGER



Fuck, fuck, fuck. It was her. It was her, and I threatened to kill her. I listen to her whimpers fade into the darkness and drop to my knees. I press the gun to my temple. End it. It's the only way. It's the only fucking way. I just told the love of my life that I didn't want her, that I'd kill her. I listened to her fall apart and I kept going. I'm a fucking monster. *Just end it.*

I push the cold metal into my temple farther and my hand shakes. Her fuckin' cries, they broke me. The way she touched me. Her scent against my skin. Her body against mine. She fucking broke me, and I just broke her in return. I drop the gun and pummel my fists into the sand, roaring curses and angry bellows. I stand, spinning to the nearest dark tree and punch it until my knuckles are bruised and raw. How could I be such a fucking coward? She wanted to help me. I knew she would, and I scared her. I scared her so bad I know she'll never come back.

"Jagger?"

Fuckin' Sharleen. Always the fuckin' hero. I hear her footsteps on the sand as she approaches. She stops in front of me and shines a light over my panting form.

"What happened?"

"The woman that made the bet got away," I grind out. "I didn't get her in time."

"Oh, I'm sure it won't matter. Mick will sort it out."

"Whatever."

I stand and walk toward the house. When I get inside, I stare down at the blood dripping from my knuckles. Sharleen notices and her eyes widen.

"You're bleeding."

“Who fuckin’ cares, Sharleen? I bleed every fuckin’ day. Don’t pretend to care about me, it’s because of you that I’m here. I hope you rot in hell. One day, I’ll make sure you do.”

Her mouth drops open. “I didn’t mean for this to ... go so far.”

Oh, please.

She’s evil, and not a thing she says will ever change that.

“What did you think would fuckin’ happen? I gave you my life, you knew how dangerous my father was, and you went ahead and involved him anyway. Because of you, I’ll never feel love again; because of you, I’ll never see her again. I fuckin’ hate you.”

“I did love you, I did, and I never wanted bad things to happen, I ...”

“*Do not*,” I roar. “Don’t you fuckin’ open your mouth and try to make this better. You had a chance, and you picked him. I hope he makes the rest of your life a fuckin’ misery. Do not speak to me again.”

“Jagger ...” she tries.

Fuck. I spin around toward her and grip her shoulders. My blood trickles down her top but she doesn’t move. I squeeze her so hard, tears burst forth and roll down her cheeks. I know I’m hurting her, and I don’t care. I don’t fucking care.

“You fucked up, but while you were fucking up, you fucked me up, too. I never asked for that. I gave you everything I had. I loved you. You’re a fucking bitch.”

“You’re hurting me,” she cries, her face pathetic as she tries to get me to break.

“Stay the fuck away from me,” I say, releasing her. “I wouldn’t piss on you if you were on fire.”

She turns with a cry, and rushes out.

Old me might have cared that she’s hurting, that my words probably cut her deeper than she’s ever been cut before, but new me doesn’t care. I don’t care if she lives or dies. I don’t

care to help her, or speak to her, or have anything to do with her for the rest of my living days.

I walk into my room and stare out over the ocean, the moon lighting the waves.

She was so close, so fucking close.

To hear her, to feel her, to smell her ...

I did what I had to do.

It's for the best.

But her cries will haunt me until the day I die.

Which is hopefully fucking soon.

WILLOW



I walk through the door when I arrive home, soaking wet and numb. Jagger's words play over and over in my head. If you come back, I'll kill you. *I'll kill you.* The pain in my heart is far beyond anything I've ever felt. My entire body is moving, but I can't feel a damned thing. I can't swallow the lump in my throat. I can't take a breath without my lungs screaming. When I step into the living room, everyone gets up quickly and rushes over. I know how I look. I don't care.

"Willow, what happened?" Ace asks, touching my cold, wet cheek. "What the hell happened?"

I don't answer. Like a zombie I walk down the hall, forcing each foot to go in front of the other. Forcing my body to move when all I want to do is crumble to the floor and scream until this pain leaves. Until I can't feel it for a second longer. I don't know if I can take much more of this. I don't know if I can handle it.

"Willow ..."

Ava's voice trails down the hall after me, and, slowly, I turn. My eyes meet a lot of very confused, worried ones as they all stand, staring at me, waiting expectantly for me to tell them what happened. I have to tell them, might as well get it out while it's playing like a bad song in my head. Over and over on repeat. Like a fucking nightmare.

"I saw him. He doesn't want help. If I go back, he said he'd kill me."

Shocked gasps follow me down the hall and into my room. I shut the door quietly and walk over to the crib where my son is sleeping, thumb in his mouth, looking peaceful. That's when

the wall breaks. My tears begin flowing in a steady stream, and before I know it, they're running out and horrible, pained noises are coming from my throat. I don't want to stand here and cry over Cody's crib. I don't ever want those noises to fill his dreams. From behind, arms go around me.

"It's okay, honey. It's going to be okay," Jenny whispers.

I can't speak, even if I wanted to. Jenny slowly turns me and leads me out of the room so as not to wake Cody. He doesn't even stir. The second we step out, more arms are around me and Ava has joined the group hug. They both hold me so tightly I can hardly breathe, but that doesn't stop my breakdown from continuing. It just slowly rips me to pieces inside. Bit by bit, it tears me down, until I feel like I might just stop breathing.

"I know you're hurting," Ava says carefully, "but, honey, you know he didn't mean it. He's trying to protect you."

I stop crying and pull back, staring at them through blurry lashes.

"No, he meant it."

"Willow, honey, he didn't," Jenny tries now, too. "He doesn't want you to get involved, if you get involved you're risking your life. Jagger loves you, he is going to do whatever it takes to make sure you don't involve yourself, and if that means making you think he would hurt you, then he'll do it. Don't you see that?"

I fall silent. I think back to the conversation and the low whip of his voice. I felt like he meant it, every single thing inside me felt like he meant it, but maybe they're right, maybe he was trying to scare me off. The pain in my heart is all the same, though, and I don't know if I can continue long enough to find out if he was protecting me or if he truly meant it.

"Come on," Ava says, rubbing my back, "it's going to be okay."

"I felt him, he was so close," I croak out. "He was right there ... right there."

“I’m sure he is feeling the same right now,” Jenny assures me.

“I didn’t tell him about Cody, he doesn’t know. I should have told him. Maybe that would have changed things. Maybe ...”

Jenny steps back, putting her hands on my shoulders and stopping me. “You did everything right. We will fix this, okay?”

“Hey ...”

A masculine voice comes from behind us, and we turn to see Bull. I’m surprised to see it’s him, considering he’s usually so quiet. My eyes meet his, and he offers me a small smile.

“Mind if I talk to Willow?”

The girls look to me for confirmation. I nod my head and Jenny rubs my shoulder before taking Ava’s hand, and they leave the room. Bull steps closer.

“Listen, I know what happened out there tonight was crushing. I can’t make you believe anything else, but I can try. Jagger loves you, if you saw how he was when you got taken, you would understand. He vowed he would do anything to make sure you lived a safe life. I know what he said, but I know him. I’ve known Jagger a long, long time, and I know when he cares. He loves you, and I know he is just trying to scare you off because he doesn’t want you involved.”

I smile weakly and nod, my heart heavy. Bull smiles, more to himself than me. “Did he ever tell you how we met?”

I shake my head. “No.”

Bull grins now. He’s quite dazzling, really. I can’t help but smile, too. It’s not often I see his face so ... light and carefree.

“I was eighteen. I was a rebel back then. Tough life, hard parents, no siblings. Anyway, I got into some trouble with a bunch of men at a bar one night. Jagger and Ace were there, both sitting and drinking. Four men jumped me, and I had no hope. The two boys jumped in and beat the shit out of them. They helped me, they didn’t even know me, but they helped

me. Jagger took me outside and, when I thanked him, you know what he said?”

I shake my head.

“He said, boy, don’t thank me. You change, you hear? You get one chance at life and if you want to pick on people three times the size of you and have your ass kicked, then you go right ahead. But that’s wasting your chance, and you don’t waste your chance on shit like that. You make a choice, and you stick with it. You want me to give you a choice?”

I smile because I could hear Jagger saying something like that. “So, what did you say?” I can’t help but ask.

Bull grins. “I said okay, tell me what you’ve got.”

“What did he say?”

Bull throws his head back and laughs, and then he tilts his head to the side and shows me a faint scar on his jaw. “He hit me so hard my jaw split. Then he took me in, and I’ve been with him since. He gave me a chance, Willow. He gave me a chance when I had nothing else. He believed in me.”

Pride swells in my chest. Jagger manages to find the good in absolutely everyone. Bull pats my hand, the only type of comfort I think he knows how to give.

“Don’t give up, not yet. If he doesn’t want you when all this is done, then there’s just nothing you can do about it. But right now, you have to make your choice, and only you know what’s right.”

I know he’s right. I know only I can make this choice, and I know deep down in my heart I’ve already made it. I want to help Jagger, and I’ll do whatever it takes to get him out of that place.

Even if it means heartbreak for me.



“RING THIS NUMBER,” Angel says, a few days later, handing me a slip of paper. “I got it from Huck. You can reach

Jagger. Tell him to meet us tomorrow night at the wharf.”

He wants me to call Jagger?

Just like that?

As if nothing has happened.

“Huck? Why does his name keep coming up?” I say, instead.

“Jagger and Huck go way back when he was involved with your father. While Huck was a cop, Jagger and he had a deal. I don’t quite know what it was, but he trusts Huck and Huck has helped him out of a few situations. He’s got information and he can get access to some serious shit that we could never imagine. He’s of good use to us, when we need.”

“I don’t know, Angel ...”

“Trust me on this. Don’t back down this time. Stand your ground and tell him you have something to tell him and it’s urgent. Will you do it?”

I hesitate. I can do this. I *have to* do this. Right? I have been telling myself for the last few days that Bull is right and Jagger didn’t mean what he said. I have been assuring myself that I’m doing this for Jagger, not for me. It’s not about me. So, I dial the number and hold the phone to my ear. My hand trembles. It answers on the first ring, and when Jagger’s voice comes across the speaker, I feel my heart break a little more.

“Sharleen, if you don’t stop fuckin’ ringing me on a private number, I’m goin’ to lose my shit. We fucked. It was once. Mick doesn’t need to now, so get the fuck over it.”

I pull the phone away from my ear quickly, ending the call. Pain slams into my chest and my fingers shake as the words on the other line repeat over and over in my head. He’s with Sharleen again? How could I be so stupid? He said he moved on and it’s clear that wasn’t a lie. All along, he wasn’t protecting me. He got over me. The pain in my stomach is so intense I struggle to stop myself from doubling over. Angel asks me something, but it doesn’t register. All I can hear is Jagger’s voice. His words.

“Willow?”

I snap my head up and meet Angel’s eyes.

“What happened?”

“Disconnected. Sorry,” I manage.

I can’t tell them. I can’t.

“Fuck it, we’re going to have to go in. Are you with me?”

I meet his gaze, and part of me wants to scream no, that I can’t do it. I want to run from my pain, I want to curl up into a ball and hide from the world, but I can’t do that. It’s not about me now, it’s about my son. It doesn’t matter whether Jagger and I are together or not, I have to do this for Cody. He needs to know about Cody, and if he chooses her so be it, but I owe him enough to get him out of that place. So, for now, I have to pull on my big girl panties—yet again—and suck it up. I look Angel square in the eyes even though I feel like my soul has been ripped from my very body.

“Tell me what I have to do.”

He nods, and then turns and leaves the room. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. Think of Cody. *Think of Cody*. It’s for him. Everything I do is for him. Jagger needs to know. If anything, he needs to know. I owe both him and Cody that much.

I tell myself this, but even as I do, the pain in my chest turns to a scorching anger.

They were all wrong about Jagger.

He doesn’t love me.

If he loved me he wouldn’t be with her.

If he loved me ... he would have let me help.

He’s not thinking about me anymore, yet I’m still the one who has to do all of this for him, just in hopes he might get the chance to meet his son someday.

Bubbling rage sets into my chest, the kind of rage that I’m not even going to try and fight anymore.

I need it, because if I don't feel rage then I'll feel pain, and I'm so tired of pain. I need something else, something that'll make me stronger, that'll push my emotions down and let me do what needs to be done.

I need to hate him.

It's the only way.

JAGGER



She believed me.

S Only a few people have my new number, and I knew when that unknown caller came up that it would be her. I just fucking knew it. If it wasn't, it would be one of the boys and they'd surely tell her what I said. I knew it was her when the phone line went dead. I am just adding to her hurt, I am pushing her to the limits. I know it's not the right thing to do, I know I'm breaking her, but I have no other choice. It's the only way she'll move on.

She has to move on.

I had to make her think I was with Sharleen, I had to make sure she didn't keep chasing me. If I didn't, she could very well lose her life, and there is no way in hell I am letting that happen. Not on my watch. I toss the phone into the nearby wall and pace my room. I don't know what they're planning, but, obviously, my words weren't enough to scare Willow away.

She's so fucking stubborn.

Did she know I didn't mean those harsh words I said on the beach that night? Maybe she knows me better than I know myself. I flop down onto the bed and close my eyes, thinking of her sweet face. God, I've missed her. I haven't fucked another woman since the day she left, and I'm wound up so tightly. I can't ... I just can't move on. I tried, one drunken night, and I couldn't do it. I'll never be the same without her.

I'll never fuck another woman and have it feel the way it felt with her. I'll never have lips around my cock that'll warm me the way hers did. I'll never feel a kiss so damn sweet it

knocks me off my feet. I feel my cock growing, and I snarl a curse. I have no problem getting hard when thinking about her, but when I try to move on, *nothing*. I told her to move on, one day I'll have to do the same.

Acid runs through my veins at that thought. I can't imagine anything worse than thinking of her with someone else. It fucking burns. I sit up and let my thoughts take me back to her, and that gorgeous little body with those beautiful breasts, that perky ass, and those sensual lips. I close my eyes and feel her beside me, touching me, kissing me, stroking me. She made everything okay. *Everything*.

I jerk my jeans down and grip my cock. I fucking hate doing this. Hate that I have to use my own hand because I can't be with anyone else. I'm in love with a woman I can't have, and I can't get over that. I stroke up and down, grunting as pleasure swells in my body. Fucking hate this, but I love that for a moment I'm with her and it feels okay. It's a moment, but it's everything.

I stroke gently, picturing those full lips smiling up at me as she puts her tongue around my cock. I pick up the pace, feeling everything inside me tense as pleasure rises up my shaft ready to explode. I remember the sweet feeling of driving into her wet flesh and that's my undoing. I grunt and begin spurting cum all over my stomach. I open my eyes and stare down at the white mess. I close my eyes and shake my head, sighing. I'm fucked up.

Pitiful. That's all I am. *Pitiful*.



WILLOW



“Willow, you can’t go down there!”

Rusty is holding my arm, but I’m not listening. I know who they’ve got down there, and I want in. I want in like yesterday. I don’t care if they think they’re protecting me by keeping me away, I made a choice, and I’m sticking by it. That choice is that I’m going to be part of this, and no matter what they say or do, I’m not backing down.

“Let me go, Rusty,” I grind out. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

He snorts. “Not goin’ to happen.”

I’m sorry for this.

I launch my foot backward and hit his shin. He roars with pain and stumbles back, letting me go long enough to lurch forward and through the door. I bolt down the stairs and into the basement of the old warehouse the boys are in. All of them turn when I come rushing in, but it’s the man in the chair that I care about the most.

Danny is sitting, tied to an old rickety chair. His eyes move to me and widen, and then suddenly he’s yelling out for my help. As if there is ever a chance I’d help him.

“Willow! What’s going on? Make them stop. Help me.”

I throw my head back and laugh. Ace snarls a curse, and Angel orders me to leave. I ignore them both. Instead, I calmly walk over and punch Danny so hard in the face that his head jerks backward. It feels good. It is something I have wanted to do for so long. It heals something in my soul.

“That’s for my wasted years with you and your abuse.”

I hit him again, his nose making a cracking sound.

“That’s for all the blood you shed that wasn’t yours.”

I hit him again, and his lip splits.

“And that’s for Jagger.”

He roars a curse, spitting blood all over me, and jerks in the chair. Angel and Ace are staring at me, both of them unsure what to do. I can only imagine how it looks, and I don’t care. Danny deserves everything that’s coming for him.

“You do as they ask, because I swear to god, I will end you, Danny. I’ll put a bullet in you right now and end you. You’re nothing to me. You’re the scum of this earth, and you ruined my life.”

“Fuck you, bitch.”

I move quickly, spinning and pulling the gun from Ace’s hand. He yells out, but I’m too quick. I spin back around and press it to Danny’s temple. I have a fresh new rage inside of me now. A determination I wasn’t sure I’d ever find again.

“Do you think I’m joking? I have lost my heart, my life, and everything I lived for. He was everything to me. I don’t care about you. I hate you. Seeing you swim with the fishes is fine by me.”

“Don’t,” he rasps, eyes wide. “Don’t, please. I’ll help.”

I step backward and run my fingers across the cool metal of the gun. It makes me feel powerful.

“Are you done?” Ace whispers in my ear, jerking the gun from my hand.

“Just needed to get that out of my system,” I whisper back.

Ace doesn’t answer, he just turns back to Danny. “Now that you know we’re not messin’ around, you can tell me where Jagger’s next fight is and how we can get in.”

“You can’t get in,” Danny spits. “You can’t unless you’re a fighter or VIP. It’s too risky to let the public in.”

“You’re a fighter, Danny,” Ace points out.

Danny’s eyes widen. “No, I won’t do it.”

“How much do we have to pay you?” I snap.

I'm tired of the games.

Money talks, especially for men like Danny.

Danny glances at me. "You'll pay me?"

"I'll pay you if you help me out. If you don't, well ... you know how it ends."

"How much?"

Ace snorts. "Dick."

Danny glares at him but looks back to me.

"I'll give you half a million," I mutter, as though it's no more than petty cash.

Danny's eyes widen, but he tries to play it cool. I know that's a lot of money, and he'd do just about anything for it. "Fine, if you swear you'll let me go and give me the money, I'll get you in. But, I can only get you in once."

"Once is all I need." I say simply.

"If you try anything on her," Angel growls, "I swear to god, I'll hunt you down, and, believe me, you'll wish to god I never got hold of you."

"I get it." Danny mutters.

"Good, I hope you do. If you value your life, you won't lay a fucking hand on her."

"Well, you had better get your shit together, his fight is tonight," Danny says, flashing me a small smirk.

I look over at Angel. "Tonight ..."

"Yeah. Are you ready?"

I nod. "I have to be."



“Stop darting around,” Danny snarls, grabbing my arm and jerking me closer to him, “You’re drawing attention to yourself, which is something you don’t want to do. Now quit it.”

“Everyone is looking at me!” I mutter, eyes connecting with the crowd of people lining up, just staring at me, their eyes narrowed.

“Because you’re a woman, not many women come in.”

Danny tugs my hand again, dragging me to the entrance. I’m decked out in disguise again, and I can see a lot of men lingering around the doors to the fighting club, just waiting to get in, waiting to get their chance to bet on a life. When we reach the bouncer, Danny greets him by name and the huge man grins back, his eyes scanning over me.

“Who’s the lady?”

“She’s with me, man. Cashed up. She’s good for it.”

“You know we don’t like ladies in the club.”

“She’s cool, trust me.”

“Fine, but you can answer to Mick if somethin’ goes wrong.”

Danny shrugs. “Mick cleared it.”

Without another word, he pulls me through the door, and we step into a large room filled with people. It’s dark and smells moldy, like it hasn’t seen the light of day before. In the middle of the room is a massive fighting ring and surrounding it are big crowds of men, all of them drinking and yelling, even though nobody is in the ring yet. I swallow as my eyes dart around. Seeing Jagger fight, I don’t know how that’ll feel for me. My gaze moves to Mick standing on a large crate at

the front of the room. He spots Danny and me, and his eyes narrow.

“Mick’s coming,” I say, calmly.

I need to get into my character again, otherwise Mick will become too suspicious.

Danny turns his head and watches as Mick shoves through the crowd. When he stops in front of us, he growls, “What the fuck, Daniel?”

Danny shrugs. “She’s with me.”

Mick narrows his eyes. “You made a bet for the fight, but I never said you could fuckin’ come here.”

“Yes, I did,” I say in my accent, “but you didn’t think I would stay away and let you rip me off, did you?”

He’s staring at me with rage and frustration. Jagger was meant to take me out; I’m sure by now he knows that I got away, but he probably also figured I would never come back after that. He was wrong.

“If you get hurt, it’s not my problem. These men, they don’t appreciate women bein’ in here.”

I shrug, and Mick gives me one last scathing look before going back to his crate. Danny pulls me toward the fighting ring and his hand remains wrapped firmly around my wrist as Mick announces the fight in a loud, booming voice that has everyone stopping.

“Welcome back everyone. Tonight, we have a good fight. One that is more than worth your time and money. We have Tiger from out west, he’s new here and has a lot of bets goin’ in his direction, I hear he’s good, I guess we’ll find out,” Mick pauses to let people cheer. “And, of course, you all know the other fighter, my main man Jagger. You know where my loyalty lies, but let’s see who comes out on top. Are you all ready?”

The crowd goes wild.

My head whips around, trying to see past the seas of tall men, and when I see him, my heart stops. The man fighting

Jagger is tall, muscly, and fucking huge. I don't care though; my eyes are glued on Jagger. He's wearing a loose pair of cotton shorts and nothing else. He has bandages wrapped around his hands and his body is almost pulsing with anticipation.

His body is big, much bigger than before. It's almost too big. I stare at his face for long moments and take him in. He has a fading black eye, a fresh scar runs down his temple and there's another on his cheek. His messy black hair is all over the place and he looks like a wild animal. He's hopping from foot to foot, just waiting to be let loose. My heart breaks a little, and the rage I felt for him earlier, simmers down a little.

I don't know this man, and yet, at the same time, I do.

"Stop starin' at him like a desperate broken-hearted woman," Danny hisses. "You're drawin' attention to yourself."

"Fuck off, Danny."

He snorts. *Asshole.*

I watch as the two men step into the ring and bump fists. Then Mick stands between them and counts it down. Before I know it, fists are flying. I let out a gasp, but it's drowned out by the deafening screams and cheers of the people around me. I watch Tiger slam a fist into Jagger's face, sending him flying back into the rubber railings, which he bounces off as if it didn't even hurt.

He takes two steps forward and lands a punch right onto Tiger's mouth, and a loud crack can be heard. Tiger doubles over and Jagger takes the opportunity to upper cut his face, sending him stumbling upward and then backward. Tiger spits blood out of his mouth and manages to stay on his feet, lashing out and connecting with Jagger's jaw once more. Before I can see his reaction, Jagger slams a fist into Tiger's jaw. Tiger's head spins to the side and spit and blood fly, landing on people standing close enough to get hit.

Jagger turns to his side and drops a power punch into Tiger's right cheek. Tiger's knees buckle and his back bends as he falls onto the floor. Blood pours from his nose and mouth.

He's out cold. Mick roars his victory and jumps into the ring to count it down. Tiger isn't getting back up, so everyone cheers and roars over Jagger's win. Mick takes Jagger's hand and holds it up high, and everyone bellows so loudly I can't hear myself think.

That's when Jagger's eyes fall on me. His eyes widen. Surely, he doesn't know it's me? Maybe he's staring at Danny? I glance at the man beside me, but he's oblivious to it, instead he's jumping around cheering with delight. When I look again, Jagger's eyes are on mine. Does he know it's me? How? I don't understand. My confusion is cut off when I see Sharleen and my heart turns to stone. She rushes out and wraps her arms around Jagger, he hesitates a moment, and then he responds. He wraps an arm around her and presses his lips to hers.

Rage swarms in my chest.

White hot rage.

I look away, feeling my skin prickle. I thought I could handle this, I thought it would be okay but he doesn't care a single bit about me and what we had. How could he? How could he just forget me like that? Is that all I meant to him? Danny grips my arm and pulls me close, not caring about my trembling lip. He wants his money, nothing more, nothing less, and he'll not stop until he gets it. He leads me through the crowd to a small door, and I'm too hurt to hesitate. My entire body feels like jelly, and my brain drowns out the sounds of the crowd as we move.

"You have five minutes. Jagger will go out back to get ready for the next fight. He always gets ready alone. The blonde will stay out with Mick, she always does."

Danny peers over the crowd, and, when he sees Jagger disappear, he shoves me through the door. I stumble into a dimly-lit room. I can't see much, there's a few lockers and a silver bench in the middle. A man is sitting on the bench, his head hung. I know that man, I know him as well as I know myself.

"Why the fuck are you here?"

He doesn't look up.

He knows it's me. He recognized me?

"How did you know it was me?"

He looks up and turns, staring directly into my eyes.

"Do you think I'd ever forget those eyes? I told you not to come back, so why did you? I told you what I'd do."

"And I didn't believe you," I say, pushing my chin out.

He stands suddenly, reaching down into his bag, and before I know it a gun is being pointed at my head. I stare in shock. He's panting, anger flashes in his gaze and it scares me. He wouldn't hurt me, would he?

"Jagger ..."

"Get the fuck out of here. I don't want you. I don't love you. I wish you would get that through your head!"

Ouch. I put up my wall, straighten my shoulders and walk forward. I have to trust that the guys are right, and he's only saying it to make me leave, that he wouldn't hurt me. His eyes widen and he flinches, but he doesn't lower the gun. When I'm standing with it pressed firmly to my forehead, I stop.

My breath freezes in my lungs.

"Do it," I seethe, "you want to fucking shoot me? Do it. I have lived through hell, you would be doing me a favor."

"Willow," he rasps, "just leave. We're done."

"We are, yes, and I wish it were that simple. It's not simple anymore, though. It hasn't been simple for months. I wish I could just walk away, Jagger, I wish I could have just packed up and moved on. Maybe if it was just me, I could have."

"What are you talking about?"

I meet his eyes and with a hard heart, I reach into my top and pull out a photo. A photo I hid in there, praying I'd get the chance to do this. I slam it against his chest. He lowers the gun, and his fingers brush mine as he takes the photo from my hand. Shivers run through me, but I shove them away. He

unfolds the paper and stares, God, he just stares. I see nothing in his expression for the longest moment, but when he looks up at me, I see it. I see emotion. His eyes are glassy. His jaw is tight.

“His name is Cody,” I say. “He’s six months old and he’s your son. Do you really think I didn’t want to move on, Jagger? Do you think I wanted to live with the agony? Do you think I wanted to live without you? No, I didn’t. I can’t change how you feel about me. I can’t change your choice, but I can change my son’s life. You deserve to know. I’m not doing this for you, right now I want to hurt you. I’m doing it for him. You want help? You meet us at the wharf tomorrow at noon. If not, I move on and so does he.”

I turn and walk out without another word. I’ve said all that needs to be said.

I only pray that it’s enough.



JAGGER



I sit in bed later that night staring at that photo. The boy looks just like me, I have no doubt he's mine. My son ... She had a baby. *My son*. I swallow and run a swollen finger over the picture. This changes everything and she knows it. I've fucked up. I've made her think I don't care, I've kissed Sharleen in front of her, and all along she was just trying to help me and let me know I had a son. Fuck.

A soft knocking at my door has me looking up, and I see Sharleen walk in wearing some skimpy fucking night gown. I know what she thinks, and she's fucking wrong. I kissed her tonight because I knew Willow was there, nothing more. She doesn't know that though and obviously thinks I want her. This isn't going to end well, likely with a black eye and another split lip. The woman has a foul temper.

"Hey, about tonight," she begins.

Here goes nothing. "Sharleen, I fucked up. I shouldn't have kissed you. Didn't want to. I was proving a point."

She was leaning a hip against the door in a sexy way, now she's dead straight and glaring at me. "Excuse me?"

"I don't mean to be an asshole about this, but I was high as fuck and trying to piss Mick off. It wasn't about you."

I've done drugs once or twice since I've been here but she thinks I do a lot more than I actually do. My story will work, and I know it does when her face scrunches and she looks like I've slapped her.

"What?"

Here goes.

"How many times do I have to remind you that we aren't a couple? You're fucking my father, for Christ's sake."

“So what? Doesn’t mean we can’t fuck, too.”

I glare at her in disgust. “Do you have no self-respect? Do you honestly want to be that girl, Sharleen?”

She gapes. “What do you mean *that* girl? Are you calling me easy?”

“You’re offering yourself up like some sort of toy to anyone that’ll have you, even if that person treats you like a dog. Have some respect. The girl I love would never do what you’re doing now. I have more respect for myself than to ever touch a woman who clearly doesn’t care about herself.”

I feel bad, only a touch. Sharleen deserves every horrible word she gets thrown at her, but I don’t exactly want to be the one tossing them around. Still, I have to get it through to her and the only way is to be cruel and cold. She doesn’t hear anything else.

Her eyes widen. “Fuck you, Jagger, you’re a waste of my time.”

“Right back at ya, babe,” I mutter, glancing at the television playing in the background.

She turns and storms out.

I don’t bother looking up when she slams the door. I pull out the picture and stare down at it.

My son.

I have a son.

This changes everything.

WILLOW



“Do you think he’ll show?” I ask, fumbling my hands together as my eyes dart back and forth, nerves settling in my stomach.

Ace shrugs casually, even though I can see his fists keep clenching and unclenching. “I don’t know.”

Angel, Ace, and I are at the wharf sitting in the car and waiting. It’s half past noon, and Jagger hasn’t shown. I stare back at Cody in his seat, he’s staring at a tree out the window. I nearly didn’t bring him, but Angel insisted that it would help Jagger make a choice. I didn’t want him to make a choice just for Cody, but I also know he deserves to see his son, even if it is just once.

A black car pulls into the empty car park, and my head snaps around. When it stops and pulls up, I zone in on the door. Jagger gets out. He’s dressed in black jeans, a black shirt and black sunglasses. Oh god, he looks so perfect, so gorgeous. My heart aches for him. How can I ever move on? How can I just forget? I hang my head. The hurt runs so fucking deep. He wants her. I have to remind myself that he’s no longer mine.

“Give us a minute.”

Angel and Ace get out of the car. I stare with bated breath as they go over and greet Jagger, a moment later they’re hugging. They talk for a moment, and then Jagger’s gaze swings to the car. I watch him lift his sunglasses and narrow his eyes. Taking a deep breath, I get out of the car. Jagger stares at me for a long moment when our eyes meet, and I hold my breath, terrified. So many things pass between us, so many

unspoken words. His blue eyes crush my heart in ways that are so unimaginably painful.

“You came,” I say simply when he walks over and stops in front of me.

My voice is bitter, but I can’t help it.

He nods. “Is he here?”

I nod. Turning, I open the car door and Jagger hesitates a moment. I lean in and unclip Cody from the car seat, pulling him into my arms.

“It’s now or never, little man.”

He smiles at me, completely unaware as to what’s happening around him. I force a smile back, and then I lift him out of the car. Turning, I face Jagger and watch as his eyes widen and his body flinches, it’s almost like a harsh jerk. He begins panting and his fists clench. I can see the fresh bruises on his cheek and some stitches in his lip from last night’s fight. He steps forward and Cody looks up at him. He smiles and drool runs down his chin.

A baby babble escapes his cute little mouth.

“Oh ... fuck.” Jagger breathes.

It’s silent for a long moment after that. Then Cody reaches out and grips Jagger’s necklace, and that’s it for me. I look away, swallowing back my tears. *Come on Willow, get it together. You have to be strong for your son.* Getting it together, I turn back and see Jagger is staring at me. Cody has a hand wrapped around one of Jagger’s fingers, and it breaks my heart. It just tears it right out.

“Do you want to hold him?” I grind out, trying to fight back my emotions.

Jagger nods, and I pass Cody over. When Jagger takes him in his arms, a tear stumbles down my cheek. I can’t fight it anymore. Cody touches Jagger’s face, and I wonder if he knows that somehow he’s important. Jagger makes a small sound in his throat as Cody continues to pull and stroke his face. I turn away.

“Can we just discuss what needs to happen?” I say, my voice scratchy.

Jagger turns to me, but I refuse to meet his eyes. I can't let him see how much this is hurting me. *I can't.*

“Boss, the choice is yours. You want our help or not?” Ace asks, stepping up beside me and taking my hand, squeezing it.

I take a deep, shaky breath.

Jagger pulls his eyes from my face and stares at the two men.

“Yeah, I do.”

I almost cry with relief.

“Good. We need to discuss it in private. How long have you got?”

“Two days. I have two days off. I always disappear during that time. Mick doesn't question it. I always come back. He knows he has the upper hand.”

Two days. Two days with him. We get two whole days with him.

“Right.” Ace nods. “Willow, you good with him coming back with us?”

I stare at Jagger, and his eyes meet mine again. “It's not really a choice, is it?”

I reach out for Cody, and Jagger turns slightly. “Can I hold him a minute longer?”

I nod.

“You want to take your car?” Angel asks.

“Nah, leave it here,” Jagger mutters. “No one will see it. I don't want it followed.”

“Right, let's go then.”

We all make our way back to the car. Jagger hands Cody back to me, and, once again, I avoid that gaze. He knows it's affecting me, he knows it, and he's doing it anyway. I strap

Cody in and sit beside him. When Jagger slides in beside me, I stiffen. Shit, bad move. I should have rode shotgun.

“Don’t tense like that. You’re acting like I’m going to hurt you.”

“You mean like you threatened?” I mutter.

Jagger flinches, but he doesn’t say anything. I turn and stare out the window. The men all talk as we drive, but I don’t join in the conversation. My heart is heavy, and my soul is tired. I’m relieved that, for a minute, he’s with us, but I also know that could end and it’ll be hell on my heart once again. When we arrive at my house, Jagger’s eyes widen.

“You live here?”

“Yes,” I say simply.

He nods and slides out of the car. I get out after him and then go around to unbuckle Cody. I take him my arms and walk inside, not looking back at Jagger. I can’t. I feel like I’m going to be sick. When I get in, Ava, Jenny, Rusty, and Bull leap up from their spot on the sofa, where they have been waiting for our return.

“How’d it go?” Ava asks, her eyes wide.

When Jagger walks through the door, they all gasp. I keep walking down the hall. I hear hugging and mutters of happiness – of course they’re happy. He’s here. They deserve to be happy. Hell, I would have been happy too if it weren’t for him and Sharleen. I get into my room, close the door, and put Cody on the bed. I clamp my eyes shut and swallow down my tears. When he’s safe, I’ll be able to move on with my life. I have to believe that I can. I have to. A gentle knock sounds out, and I turn to see Ava step in the room.

“Hey. Are you okay?”

I shake my head and bite my lip. She comes over and sits on the bed beside me. Always my support. Always my rock.

“It’s going to be okay. I know it’s hard, but at least he’s okay.”

“I know.”

“We can get through this. We have to.”

“I know that, too.”

“You want to go for a run? I’ll take Cody.”

I nod. “Would you mind? I need to clear my head.”

“Of course I wouldn’t mind.” She smiles at Cody, scooping him into her arms and blowing raspberries on his cheeks, making him laugh.

She sits with me while I change, and then she stands, and we walk out into the hall. When we get into the living area, everyone is sitting down. Jagger stares at me when I walk out, but I refuse to look at him. I can’t, not right now. I’m barely holding it together. I’ll get it together, I will, I just need a minute to get myself in the right headspace.

“I’m going for a run,” I announce to no one in particular. “I’ll be back soon.”

I walk out the door before anyone can stop me. Jagger calls my name, but I don’t stop. When I hit the sand, I run. I flat out sprint, pumping my legs until I can’t feel anything else but the burning pain in my muscles and the ache in my lungs as they scream for relief. I round the rocks at the left end of the beach and then stop. I lean over and grip my knees, panting and heaving. When I hear footsteps behind me, I spin around. Jagger is panting, too—he kept up with me and I didn’t even hear him.

I didn’t know he was there.

“What are you doing here?” I wheeze.

“Can we talk?”

“No,” I gasp, trying to get some air into my lungs, “we can’t talk. I have nothing to say to you.”

“Just let me speak.”

“You threatened my life, you had sex with Sharleen, and you kissed her right in front of me. There is nothing to say.”

“I had no fuckin’ choice,” he grinds out. “If you let me speak you’d understand.”

“Oh, you had no choice? You accidentally slipped your dick into her?”

“I didn’t fuck her...”

“Bullshit,” I snap, shaking my head. “I was on the phone that day and you thought it was her. Don’t you dare lie to me.”

“I knew it was you. I knew it was you, and I said that because I hoped you wouldn’t come back. I was trying to protect you. I haven’t and wouldn’t lay a hand on Sharleen.”

I lift my hand, the wild rage bursting out, and I punch him. I punch him so hard in the jaw my hand throbs. He barks out a curse and takes a step back, eyes wide with shock.

“How could you?” I whisper, my voice defeated. “I was trying to help. Did you really think I’d never come for you? We have a son. I was never going to just move on. How dare you? How fucking dare you?”

I turn and walk toward the water, angry tears rolling down my cheeks.

Fuck him.

How dare he hurt me like that after everything?

“Willow!”

I dive in. Saltwater burns my eyes as I swim out to the deep blue ocean—it’s cool on my skin and a relief to my pounding head. A hand wraps around my leg, startling me, and then I’m being pulled backward. A moment later I’m in a hard set of arms, pressed against a firm, warm chest. I try to fight him off, but he’s too strong. Even with my rage, I’m not match for him. That doesn’t stop me from trying, though.

“I’m sorry. Every day, Willow. I thought about you every day. My life has been empty. I lost everything when I lost you.”

Tears burst forth and thunder down my cheeks. “I’ve barely kept my head above water. Cody was the only thing that kept me going. The thought of you with her, it broke me.”

“I swear on my life, I didn’t touch her. I knew it was you, I wanted you to go, to move on, to live your life. I was trying to do what was best.”

“It fucking killed me,” I croak.

He doesn’t answer, instead he tangles his hand into my hair and pulls me forward. His lips close over mine in a desperate, passionate kiss. I groan and open my mouth to him. Months I have imagined this kiss, imagined tasting him again. Imagined how he would smell, how he would feel. His tongue connects with mine and I groan, wrapping my legs around his waist.

He tastes of Jagger and salt water, but it’s bliss. His stitches are scratchy against my lips, but I don’t care. All I care about is him. He makes a ragged, groaning noise and pulls away. We stare at each other, and neither of us needs to speak. We both know what we want, what we *need*. Jagger walks backward until we are in the shallows. Then he drops me down onto the sand and falls over me.

The waves wash up over our bodies and I can taste the salt on his flesh as I lick and suck his neck. His hands move down my body, and he finds my shorts. I whimper when he slides them to the side, not bothering to take them off. We both know what we want, and we don’t want foreplay. I need to feel him, deep inside me. I want the stretch and burn of his cock pressing into me. My mind is on one thing and one thing only: him.

He presses his forehead against mine as he shifts and tears down his jeans. When he’s freed himself, he moves my leg to the side, holds my shorts to the other side, and slides inside me in one, hard thrust. I cry out, a pinch of pain jolting through my body, but it’s soon replaced with scorching, desperate pleasure. The kind of pleasure I’ve dreamt about every day since he left.

“Every fucking second. Every fucking minute. I never stopped thinking about you. My heart fucking died without you, Willow. I died. I lost my moment, I lost my reason for living.”

He’s fucking me, slow and steady, deep and desperate.

I grip his shoulders as he jerks his hips back and plunges inside me over and over. Pure, raw, animalistic sex. It's primal, and it's filled with need and desperation.

"Jagger, oh god."

He tilts my pelvis upward and drives his thrusts deeper. Water is still flowing up, and it splashes against us, but it only adds to the moment. My body sinks into the sand as Jagger drives harder and faster. Pleasure explodes through me as I rise higher and higher toward my release.

"Hold on," Jagger grunts. "Hold on, baby, nearly there."

"I can't, oh god ..."

"Hold on."

His thrusts become desperate, our skin slaps together and waters sloshes around us. The veins in his neck bulge and his jaw is tight. It's so fucking sensual the sight alone is enough to tip me over the edge.

"Now, fuck, now."

I erupt and cry out his name as a mind-shattering orgasm takes over. Jagger roars his release, and I can feel him pulsing deep and hard inside me. Our moans blend together and are carried off in the wind, like they are no more than a lonely grain of sand. Jagger's head drops and his forehead rests against mine again. We stay like that for long moments, just staring at each other, the water swishing up around us.

When Jagger jerks his hips, my eyes widen. He's hard again and oh, the feeling of his cock sliding in and out of my damp pussy again is mind blowing. Everything is swollen and hot, and it feels incredible. I groan and my eyes flick toward his, he's lifted his head and is staring at me now. His eyes are intense, passionate and deep. So much he wants to say, so much he can't. He slides back into me, then pulls out and repeats the blissful process.

"Jagger," I whimper. "Someone could see."

"I don't care. I care about anything but you right now. Let them see, let them see how much I need you. How much I

crave you. How much I fucking love you.”

Love me? Oh god. I close my eyes and a silent tear slides down my cheek. Jagger kisses it away and continues to move his hips. I arch up to him, moaning and gripping his back as he gently picks up the pace. He grips my top and lifts it, sliding my bra aside so he can close his mouth over my nipple. I groan and spread my legs wider as his thrusts become more desperate.

“Fuck, Jagger, more ... please.”

He uses his free hand to tilt my hips upward as he drives desperately in and out. The waves continue to wash over us, and the moment is perfect. It is everything I could have ever wanted our reunion to be. As I begin shuddering around him once more, his groans fill my ears and tip me over the edge. I cry out and cling to him as he drives every last delicious shudder from my body. A moment later, he grunts, and his own release follows once more.

This time, he sits back and slides out of me. He jerks his jeans up and pulls my shorts back into place, and then he grips my hands and pulls me up, crushing me to his chest and holding me so tightly that my breathing becomes labored, but I don't care. All I need is him.

“I left you alone. I left you to raise our son by yourself.”

I shake my head. “No, you saved me from a terrible outcome. You should never be sorry for what you did, Jagger.”

“You did it alone, all by yourself.”

I pull back and meet his gaze. “I survived, Jenny and Ava made sure of it.”

“He's perfect Willow. So fucking perfect.”

I smile. “I know.”

“Come on, we should get back. I only have two days, and I plan to make the most of it.”

“I can't bear it,” I say, shaking my head, “I can't bear you going back.”

“I have to,” he mutters. “I don’t get a choice.”

“If something happens to you, I ...

“Nothing will happen,” he interrupts. “I will come back to you, and I will get us out of this mess.”

I nod.

We stand, and we’re both soaked and covered in grainy sand. We begin walking back to my house, my heart a little lighter, my head a little less hazy.

“Why Florida?” Jagger asks as we walk.

I shrug. “I wanted something different, a new start, I guess.”

“I get it.”

“It was just lucky your fight was in Florida this month. I’m sure it was meant to be.”

He nods. “I think so.”

When we arrive back at the house hand in hand, everyone seems to slump in relief. I guess with Jagger and I fighting the plan wouldn’t be very effective. Angel walks over and slaps Jagger on the back. I let go of his hand and walk into the kitchen where Jenny and Ava are feeding Cody. I smile and take the spoon, and Cody grins at me. I scoop a spoon full of the rice pudding and slide it into his mouth.

“How are you feeling?” Ava asks.

I smile. “As good as can be expected I guess, he has to go back but at least now I know I have a greater chance of getting him back.”

Jenny rubs my shoulder. “He looks pretty good, considering.”

I smile and stare over at Jagger who is grinning at Rusty. “Yeah, he does.”

Jagger looks up and meets my gaze, and his eyes soften. I smile and look back down at Cody.

“So ... you two look nice and ... wet.” Ava grins, wiggling her brows.

I give her my best glare, but she knows I don't mean it. “We went for a swim.”

“Is that what it's called nowadays?”

I grin at her just as Jagger walks into the kitchen.

“Hey there, buddy,” Jagger says, taking the spoon from me.

Cody grins at him, and I see Jagger's face soften. It softens in a way I've never seen it soften. Cody will bring out something in him, something beautiful.

“He looks just like you,” Jenny smiles, leaning against the counter.

Jagger looks up at her, then to me. “You think?”

I raise my brows. “Are you blind?”

He chuckles and lifts Cody into his arms. “No, not blind.”

“He's a beauty,” Ace says, walking into the kitchen.

“Yeah, congrats, man. He's a great kid,” Angel adds, wrapping his arms around Ava.

I smile, and, for the first time in months, I feel like I might just have a chance to put my family back together.



WILLOW



Hot lips slide up my thighs, and a set of hard hands push my legs apart. Then I'm drowning in sensation as his tongue flickers over my clit, causing me to arch my back and fist the sheets. God, if I could wake up like this every day I would spend the rest of my life doing so. I flick my eyes open and realize it's not day, in fact—the room is dark, and the house is quiet. That tongue flicks across my clit again, and I groan, deep and low.

Jagger tilts my hips to thrust his tongue deeper into my heat, and I explode, murmuring his name and thrashing beneath his hold. He hangs onto me until he's licked every last shudder from me, and then he slowly slides up my body, licking my belly button, then up my stomach until he finds my hard nipples. He sucks and bites each one until I'm panting and begging for release once more. When his hot, hard body finally settles over mine, I take his face in my hands and kiss him.

He tastes like me and him, a beautiful combination of the most dangerous things. It's an erotic taste and seems to do good things to him, because he starts to groan, and his hands fist into my hair as he deepens the kiss until we're so tangled in each other I don't know where he ends and I begin. We're a mass of arms and legs, bodies and lips. He shifts his hips to widen my legs, and then he's inside me, deep, full, and oh-so-fucking-perfect.

He releases my mouth and thrusts into me with slow, measured strokes. Then he flips us over in one quick movement until I'm straddling him. He takes my hips in his hands and slowly begins rotating them backward and forward. His groans spur me on, and I begin following the rhythm until he's mumbling my name and whispering delicious curses.

“Talk to me,” I whisper. “Let me hear that dirty mouth I love so much.”

He groans then begins talking, and, oh god, it’s my undoing.

“So fucking wet, so fucking tight. Your little pussy is squeezing my cock, and oh god, baby, it feels so fucking good. I want to fuck you until you can’t breathe. I’ll never get enough. I’ll never get enough of that beautiful little cunt milking me ... Fuck ... I’m going to cum.”

Pleasure rips through my body, and I faintly hear his guttural groans above my cries as he finds his release, too. His cock is pulsing inside me, and I realize how much I’ve missed this. When I roll off and fall beside him, we’re both panting. Neither of us speaks for a long moment, but I decide to break the silence. “I see nothing changes, you’re still as dirty as you were before.”

He chuckles. “You make me dirty.”

“I missed you, so much,” I say softly.

“Me too, baby. Me, too.”

“Jagger?”

“Hmmm?”

“Can I call you, when you’re gone?”

He’s silent a long moment. “I’ll call you, it’s less risky that way.”

“Jagger?”

He chuckles. “Yeah?”

“Have you had any other women?”

He’s silent again for a long moment. “I tried, once. It didn’t work.”

“Once?” I croak, trying to clench down the jealousy in my heart.

“I was drunk, angry, and she hit on me after a fight. It didn’t work.”

“Oh,” I say softly.

I shouldn't be jealous, but the thought of any other woman having her hands on him makes everything inside me curl up. It makes me feel like I might just die. Jagger rolls and flicks on the lamp, then he turns to me, that blue gaze searching my face. I look away, not wanting him to see how pathetic I'm acting right now.

“I thought I'd never see you again. I thought you would move on and fall in love. I was crushed. I was drunk all the time. I was lonely. It didn't work, because my heart belongs to you. It'll never be owned by another person as long as you're on this earth, Willow.”

I swallow and nod. I can't help it, a tear breaks free and slides down my cheek. He swipes it away with his thumb.

“I never meant to hurt you, you gotta know that.”

I nod, taking his face in my hands and kissing him softly. I understand, because there's parts of me that have screamed for comfort at times, and if I was drunk enough maybe I would have taken it, too. “Never again, though?”

“Fuckin' never. I'd rather go the rest of my life with nothing than to have anyone but you.”

He wraps his arms around me, and we fall together, like we always do, so perfectly. I nestle into his chest and just breathe him in. I can't say I'm happy about what happened with the other woman, but at the same time part of me understands it. He thought he was never going to see me again. I know how that feels, and I know the loneliness it can bring.

The last year and a bit has been hell on both of us.

But we're here now, and he's with me.

I'm not wasting a single second of that.

Not even one.

Because I don't know how it'll all end.

Or when.

9



I wake before Jagger in the morning, and, much to my delight, he's laying on his back with his hands behind his head, sleeping soundly. The sheet has ridden down and his bare chest is showing, as well as that delectable V that travels deep down into the sheets. I reach out and gently stroke the satin smooth skin stretched over taut muscle. Jagger is bigger now, but he's still just as beautiful. He has new scars on his chest, I run my finger over the raised skin and my heart aches.

All this for me? I close my eyes a moment, then I re-open them and stare down at Jagger with need. I tug the sheet gently, and it slides further down his body. I see the swell of his penis head peek out from under the sheet as it rests heavily against his stomach, half hard and oh, so beautiful. I stroke my finger over the soft skin, and Jagger groans lightly in his sleep.

I lie down and gently rest my head on his stomach; he shifts a little but doesn't wake. I wrap my hand gently around his length and then slide my mouth forward and close it over the head. He swells instantly in my mouth, and his breathing becomes deeper. I turn my head slightly and see that his eyes are still closed, and as far as I know, he's still asleep. Interesting—I wonder if I can make him cum like this?

I slide my mouth over the tip once more and suck very gently and slowly. Jagger mumbles something I can't understand and his back arches off the bed, taking me with him. I suck a little harder, gently working my mouth over the now swollen head of his penis. He groans raggedly and mumbles more words that I can't understand. I suck and stroke until I feel him swell and then spurt hot and hard down my throat.

“Fuck,” he growls, his body jerking with the release.

I lick every last drop away and then meet his eyes as he stares down at me sleepily.

“You can wake me up like that any day,” he murmurs.

I smile. “I think I just might ...”

Grinning, he leans forward and strokes his thumb over my bottom lip. Then he slides it into my mouth, and I can taste his release.

“You missed some, Hoover.”

I grin and get up onto my knees, leaning in to kiss him. He puts his hand on my shoulders and shakes his head. “I don’t think so, baby.”

“Aw,” I pout prettily.

“Don’t pout at me, I’m not tasting myself.”

Stirring by the window has us looking over to see Cody beginning to wake. I slide out of bed and pull on a pair of shorts and a singlet. Jagger does the same and then he pulls the sheets off the bed; we made quite the mess. I grin at him and then peer over the side of the crib at Cody, who is now staring up at me sleepily.

“Hey, baby, you slept well.”

He breaks out into a sweet smile, and I reach down and scoop him into my arms, rustling his dark hair. Jagger walks over and sweeps down to kiss his son. Cody takes hold of Jagger’s necklace before he can pull away. I listen with happiness as Jagger chuckles and then unclips the thick silver necklace and hands it to his son. Cody squeals happily and proceeds to pop the necklace into his mouth, coating it with drool.

“Uh oh, Daddy’s not aware of choking hazards,” I tease.

“Shit,” Jagger says, reaching for the necklace.

“It’s okay,” I say, waving a hand at him, “just don’t leave him alone with it.”

I hand Cody to him and then cup his cheek, stroking my fingers down the scruff on his chin. “It’ll get easier when

you're around all the time.”

Jagger nods stiffly and then bounces Cody about as he walks out of the room, leaving me alone. I stare at the door. Did I miss something? With a sigh, I take the sheets to the laundry and then I walk out into the main living area. Only Ace and Jenny are up this early, both smiling when I walk in. Jagger is standing out the front, and Cody is in his swing on the floor. Jagger is on the phone and obviously doesn't want whoever it is to hear his son or anyone else in the background.

I prepare a bottle for Cody and sit at the table while he has it. Jenny smiles and shifts over when I sit. “How did you two sleep?”

I smile. “Well.”

“Cody?”

“Really good, not a peep.”

Ace is watching Jagger on the phone, his eyes narrowed, so I turn and watch too. He's having a serious conversation, his eyebrows are pinched together, and his jaw is tight. I stand and walk over, listening through the screen.

“Fuck, Mick. I get it alright? I'm comin' back today.”

Today? He said he had two days? My heart drops.

It feels as though everything in my world just stops, even though I know it continues to spin around me.

“Yeah,” Jagger growls, “I got it.”

He slams the phone down and turns to face me. I bite my lip and try to stop myself from saying what is swirling in my mind over and over, but I know he can see it in my face. Jagger's eyes soften, just a touch, as he meets mine. I can see that he's sorry, but it doesn't take the pain away. He steps through the screen and announces, “I gotta go back this morning.”

I grit my teeth.

“What?” Ace shakes his head. “You said two days, boss.”

“Change of plans. Mick is getting suspicious. If he continues bein’ suspicious then this goes to shit. I have to go back. It’s the only option if we want this to work.”

“We need to get the guys up so we can discuss this. Jenny,” Ace says, “go and wake them for me, babe.”

Jenny nods and stands quickly, rushing off down the hall. I walk numbly back to the table and sit down. Jagger sits beside me, taking my chin in his hand and tilting my head up.

“It won’t be for long. We’re gonna fix this baby, I swear it.”

“I thought I had two days,” I say, swallowing the lump in my throat.

“I know,” he says, his voice slowly lacking emotion, “I know.”

“Where’s your next fight? Where can we meet up with you next?” I ask, heart racing.

Jagger’s eyes fall on mine and don’t move. “Home.”

I cringe. I thought I had escaped that place and would never have to see it and the pain it brought me for a lot longer.

“Oh,” I mutter. “Of course it has to be there.”

“I have six fights there next month. It’s the only option.”

“It works,” Ace says. “We can keep a much closer eye on you there, we have resources. You can’t stay at the apartment, though. Mick has eyes everywhere. He can’t know you’re in town.”

Jagger nods. “Good point. Maggie and Aunt Mary are there, they can help with Cody.”

“Doubt it,” I mutter.

Jagger glances at me. “Willow ...”

“Maggie, I trust. Aunt Satan, I don’t.”

Ace snorts.

“Fair call, but Maggie is there and she can help. She’ll love him. You’ll need the help if we are going to pull this off. If it

wasn't for the fact that I know how stubborn you are, I would pull you out and not let you do this, but I know you're going to whether I like it or not."

"I have Cody now," I say, glancing at my son. "If it gets too dangerous, I'm out. I won't leave my son without a mother."

Especially if we can't get his father.

That thought has bubbles of pain and nerves exploding in my stomach.

Angel, Ava, Jenny, and the guys appear a moment later, most of them half asleep. Jagger wastes no time getting to the point, and starts speaking before they even have the chance to ask what's going on.

"I have to go back today. You need to get in contact with Huck and get as much information on that island as you can. He has it, don't let him tell you otherwise. We need explosives, a whole fucking lot of them, he has access to that kind of thing, too. We also need manpower. Gather anyone you know who is willing to help. Angel and Ace, you get me explosives that I can carry over and begin subtly planting or preparing. We go back once every two weeks to check on things over there; I will put them in the places they will do the most damage."

"What about the girls?" I ask.

Jagger looks over at me. "I have a plan for that. We'll do the attack on a Thursday. The reason for this is that the girls have one day a week that they get an hour off. They all go to the far side of the island and talk amongst themselves, Mick is confident they can't get off, and honestly, they couldn't even if they tried. It's the only time they get to themselves. It's right near the shoreline. If I can get them all on a boat, then they'll get off. The only problem will be taking out the five guards they have escorting them and getting in without detection. It'll need to be perfectly planned—a distraction that will call for anyone keeping an eye on the waters to be pulled away. We need to be quick, efficient, and precise."

This isn't a good plan. So much could go wrong. Yet, I feel like there aren't really many other options.

"Jagger, this is dangerous," I say, shaking my head. "Is there any other way?"

He shakes his head. "No, not to get rid of everyone in one hit."

"Sharleen?" Angel asks.

Jagger looks at his friend. "Sharleen goes off alive."

"Sharleen could be a problem," I say carefully. "She loves Mick. If she is without him, she could want revenge."

Jagger moves his gaze to me. "She *thinks* she loves Mick. She will move on. I don't like the woman, but I won't kill her."

"We're not going to help her, are we?" I mutter expecting the answer to be no.

Jagger doesn't break our stare, instead his eyes become more intense. "I can't let her die."

"She was willing to let me die!" I growl. "She was willing to let your father fuck me. She was willing to let you die ..."

Jagger's eyes flash. "What did you say?"

"I said she was willing to let me die ..."

"No, the next part."

Jagger's voice is like ice, and I freeze up. Jagger doesn't know what happened to me on that island, because I haven't had the chance to tell him considering he stayed there.

"Willow," he barks, and I flinch.

"I said she was willing to let your father fuck me."

Jagger stands, his chair skitters back so fast it smashes into a nearby coffee table. He grips my face so hard I wince. His eyes are wide and he's panting. I've never seen him so mad. He looks like he's going to lose it, really lose it.

"Did you fuck my father, Willow?"

“What? No!” I growl. “Now get your hands off me, Jagger.”

He releases me quickly, fists clenching by his sides.

“What did he do?”

“I don’t ...”

“What did he do?” he seethes, voice low.

“Come on, man, calm down,” Ace says.

“Just tell me what he did,” Jagger goes on, ignoring Ace.

“He wanted me to sleep with him. He threatened me and said that if I didn’t he would let the other men have me. He made me watch ... he made me watch Sharleen suck him and then he made me watch the other men have sex with this woman like she was some sort of dog, but he didn’t touch me.”

Everyone is staring at me, quietly shocked. I know I haven’t told anyone about what Mick did on that island, and I probably should have, but when Jagger left I wasn’t thinking about it. I was heartbroken, pregnant, and alone. I haven’t thought about it since, to be honest.

“What else?” Jagger murmurs, but his voice is icy and low.

I had better just get this over and done with.

“He took me to his room and he wanted to sleep with me. I lied and said I had my period. He made me prove it so I used my fingernail to slice my flesh so it looked like I was bleeding. He let me off for the night but he made me get into the bed with him, and ...”

“And what?”

“Jagger, boss, take a breath,” Angel says carefully. “This ain’t her fault.”

“He kissed me, and it was the worst fucking moment of my life.”

“You let him kiss you?”

I swallow and glance at Ava, who is glaring at Jagger.

“Yes.”

“And you didn’t fight him?”

“No, because I was afraid he would let all those men have sex with me. It was a choice, your dad or those men. I would rather kiss Mick a thousand times over than to let multiple men have sex with me. You would have chosen the same, if you were me, and I know it.”

“What else?” Jagger grinds out.

He’s starting to scare me.

I meet his eyes and rattle off everything else that happened. From Sharleen’s confessions to sleeping in that horrid cell. When I’m done, Jagger looks up at me, and his eyes meet mine for long moments. I don’t know how he’s going to react. He swings his eyes toward Ace and grinds out, “Sharleen goes free, but then she answers to me. Make sure of it.”

“Yes, boss.”

Jagger turns back to me. “Stay away from Mick, no matter what happens.”

“I wasn’t planning on going anywhere near him again in my lifetime.”

Jagger nods, and then turns without another word and walks out the front door, slamming it. I sigh and close my eyes. It’s not my fault, and I refuse to take it on as being my fault, but I do feel bad for Jagger, too. He lost his first wife to his father, and hearing about him kissing me, even if it was forced, would be a bitter pill to swallow.

“What just went on?” Ace asks.

I stare over at him, confused. “He’s just hurt ...”

“It was more than that. He is agitated and wound up. His whole body was tense. Is he doing drugs?”

I peer out the window, but I can’t see him. Is he doing drugs? That could explain the mood swings. “I don’t know.”

Then, I walk over to the door and pull on a light coat and walk out. I end up more than halfway down the beach when I find Jagger sitting on some rocks, just staring out at the ocean. I climb over the slippery mounds until I am perched beside him. I stare out at the ocean for long moments too, just enjoying the crystal-blue water crashing against the shoreline. Jagger reaches across and takes my hand.

“I would have done the same thing. You’re right,” he says, “it’s not your fault that you got caught up in that, it’s mine. Don’t ever think I’m blaming you.”

“Are you taking drugs, Jagger?”

He stiffens and his hand clenches around mine. “Not intentionally, but ...”

“But?”

“Mick has me take steroids to bulk up.”

I close my eyes. This is bad. Steroids can be dangerous, but mostly, they can affect someone’s mood to extreme levels. Jagger nearly lost it in there, and that kind of rage is scary, especially with a baby around.

“I know you can’t help what happens while you’re there, but can you try and stop? You’re scaring me, and Cody can’t be around that ...”

“I’ll do my best, you know I’d do anything for you and Cody.”

“I know,” I say softly.

“I can’t fuckin’ lose him, Willow. I’ve lost you so many times, if I lose him, too ...”

I grip his jaw and turn him to face me, his blue eyes scan my face. “Don’t you think like that. We’re going to be okay. I promise you.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep.”

I narrow my eyes. “We can’t think like that.”

“If anything happens to me, promise you’ll ...”

“Stop,” I say, putting my hand up. “Don’t do that. We’re going to be fine.”

I’m not sure who I’m trying to convince. Me or him. He grips my chin and pulls my lips up to his. When they press together, I groan and take hold of his neck, pulling him forward. He growls and snakes his tongue out, tangling it with mine until our lips are moving in that perfect, sexual dance. He pulls back panting and runs a thumb over my swollen lips.

“Those lips are mine, baby. Promise me you’ll never let anyone touch them.”

“I promise.”

“Good,” he says standing. “Because I would fucking kill them.”

I smile.

There he is.

There’s my man.



I’M STANDING UNDER the shower, letting the warm water wash away my anxiety while Jagger is out there making more calls. My chest clenches knowing he has to leave and knowing I can’t change it. I hate that. I really do. I wash my body, running my soapy hands over every inch of flesh. I finish up and get out of the shower just as Jagger walks in. His eyes trail down over my body, and he snakes his tongue out over his bottom lip. Oh, *my, my, my*.

He steps forward and grips my hips, then leans down to lick a droplet of water off my neck. I whimper and press myself to him. His clothes soak up the water on my body in seconds. I grind against him. We don’t have long, and I need him again. I’ve already had him so many times in the last few days, to the point there is a dull ache between my legs, but I don’t want to stop. I don’t know when I’ll see him again. I don’t know when I’ll feel him moving inside me again. Part of me fears it will be never.

“Baby, again?”

“Once more, Jagger. Please.”

Jagger takes my hips and lifts me, depositing me on the bench beside the sink. He drops to his knees and spreads my legs wide. I feel a flush creep up my cheeks as his eyes rake over my exposed pussy. He leans in and rubs a thumb over my clit, stroking it up and down.

“You’re red, I know you’re sore.”

“Please,” I whimper. “I don’t care.”

“Baby ...”

“Jagger!”

He leans in and touches the tip of his tongue to my clit, I groan and arch my hips up off the bench, using my hands to steady myself. He curls his fingers into my hips and drives his tongue in deeper, sliding it up and down my painful but wet flesh. I groan, a mixture of pain and pleasure shoot through me. I want the pleasure too much to care about the pain. When I tip over the edge with a cry, Jagger is up and yanking down his jeans before my eyes open.

I’m still shuddering when he plunges inside me, and, instantly, I cum again. I cry out as a sharp sting of pain shoots through me and almost enhances my orgasm. The pleasure subsides and the pain increases, and I know I’ve probably pushed it too far, but it was worth every single second.

“Baby ...” he groans. “It hurts, doesn’t it?”

He’s still moving his hips softly, but when I nod, he stops. Without so much as a second thought. I feel awful as I stare down at his cock. He’s hard, red, and throbbing. I slip off the bench and drop to my knees, taking him in my hands and running my tongue over his head. I taste myself on him, and it’s quite erotic. Jagger groans and jerk his hips, pushing himself farther into my mouth. I whimper and take him deeper, letting him thrust into my mouth. When he pulls out and grips his cock tightly, I peer up at him, confused.

“I want to cum on you, to leave my mark on your body for you to remember.”

“Do it,” I whisper, licking my lips.

He lets his cock go and jerks it a few times, and then he is spurting hot and hard across my chest. I watch as strand after strand of cum coats my skin and begin trickling down my chest. Oh god, that’s so fucking hot. Jagger groans, and his hand works the last of the liquid from his cock, then he pulls his jeans up and drops to his knees in front of me. He swipes a drop of cum off my chest and brings it to my mouth.

“Suck,” he orders.

I open my mouth and let him slip his finger inside. I suck his finger slowly, tasting him and loving every second of it. His growl of satisfaction makes my chest explode with lust once more.

“So fucking perfect with that mouth.”

I smile and stare down at my chest. “Apparently.”

“Come on. You have to shower again.”

He stands and opens the shower door, turning it on. I step in quickly and wash myself off, watching it slide down my body and then disappear down the drain. I turn to get out only to slam into Jagger’s bare chest. He wraps his arms around me and pushes me back against the wall, pressing his lips to my temple.

“I’m goin’ to fuckin’ miss you, baby.”

I bury my face into his chest and breathe him in. The scent of his skin, the way his body feels against mine, I want to remember it all. “I’ll miss you too, Jagger.”

“Be good for me, won’t you?”

“You know I will.”

“Are you still sore?”

I nod, sliding my cheek up and down his chest.

“Do you need me to get something for you before I go?”

I snort into his skin. “No, it’ll fade. I’m a big girl now, I think I can handle it.”

I tip my head back and peer up at him. His dark hair is pressed to his forehead, his blue eyes are intense and his lips are quirked up in a half smile. I reach up and cup his cheek.

“I love you, Johnny Black.”

“You have no idea just how much I feel that,” he murmurs.

“Stay safe for me, please?”

He strokes a thumb over my bottom lip and then kisses my forehead. “I promise.”

JAGGER



““**W**here were you, Jagger?”

Mick is pacing the room, stopping to glare at me every now and then. He’s convinced I was somewhere I shouldn’t have been, and he’s right, but I’m not going to tell him that. I’ll do everything I can to make sure he doesn’t ever know where I was.

“What the fuck is it to you? I haven’t done anything I shouldn’t. I go off all the time when it’s my days off.”

“Why didn’t you answer your phone?”

I spin on him when he approaches, arms crossed. “I don’t have to answer the fucking phone every five minutes. I do enough for you, Mick. Back off.”

“If I find out you’re seeing her ...”

“Do you really think I’d do that to her? Make her your fucking sex slave? Or someone other dirty bastards? Over my dead fucking body. This conversation is finished. I’m staying at my place on my days off.”

“No, you’re not. That pathetic attempt at a gang are too close to your old place.”

“My life, Mick.”

“You go there,” Mick warns. “I find your woman and do all the wonderful things you just listed out for me.”

“You’re a fucking bastard, anyone ever tell you that?”

He smirks. “Every day.”

I turn and walk out of the room, not bothering with a response. I can’t believe I was spawned by such a fucking pig.

I walk down the long halls of the house we've rented for these fights. It's huge, eight bedrooms, and right over on the expensive side of the city. Mick did that on purpose, and I know it's going to be hard to contact the guys and Willow. I have no doubt he'll track my phone. Luckily for me, I thought ahead.

One, I scoured my bedroom for cameras. I'm not stupid, he's trying to catch me out. After smashing every ornament and scanning every square inch of every surface, I'm certain there are no cameras. I then got myself a small burner phone. I gave the number to Ace and Willow, but told them never to call unless it was an absolute emergency and that I'd contact them when it was safe to do so. I keep that phone in my safe, with all my cash. Mick can't get into that.

As for the cars that follow me every time I leave the house, I'd just have to find a way to lose them when I wanted to go see everyone. When I get into my room, I shut and lock the door, then pull out the phone from the safe. I punch in Willow's number and send her a text, I know she'll be waiting. I can just image her pretty eyes lighting up when she sees it. I hope to God it gives her something to hang onto until this is all over.

J: Hey baby. Missing you x

A minute later, she responds.

W: I miss you more. Cody is misbehaving today. I think he misses you?

I wish I was there with my son. A stab of pain penetrates my heart. He's missing out on me, on getting to know the father I plan on being to him. So, the sooner I get this done, the better.

J: Sorry I can't be there. What's wrong?

W: Just wind. He'll be fine. He'll only scream for a few hours ...

J: Fuck. That's not good. Give him a kiss from me. Are you getting sleep?

W: Not really.

J: Try and rest. I'll come and see you as soon as I can.

W: When's you're next fight?

J: You know I can't tell you that. I know you too well

...

W: *Sighs* I want to see you.

J: I know, but I'm not risking your life. I have to stash this phone now. I'll try and see you soon. I love you x

She doesn't reply, and an image of her sitting on her bed with tears running down her face crosses my mind. Fuck. I miss her so God dammed much it burns.



WILLOW



I'm given a nice little place around the corner from the old apartment complex. It's close enough that they can keep an eye on me, but far enough away that there is no chance of Mick finding out I'm here, let alone finding out about Cody. The last thing I ever want that man to know is that I have a son. God only knows what he'd do if he knew.

The house is nice, small but comfortable. It has good access through the back, so the guys can come in and out without being seen. Ava is staying with me, which is good because being alone right now isn't something I want. Not with everything so up in the air. I settle Cody into the room with me, and then stare out at the window. It feels strange being home again, like a bad dream, almost.

"Honey?"

I lift my head with a heavy heart and glance at Ava, who is standing in the doorway.

"It's going to be okay. He'll be here with you before you know it."

I nod, no words forming.

"I didn't want to disturb you, but we have some visitors. Ace brought them around, I hope it's okay."

That sparks my attention. I sit up, taking Cody with me. I put him on my lap and tip my head to the side. "Who?"

"Aunt Satan and Maggie."

I groan, of course it's them. "Are you serious?"

"Jagger made sure Maggie knew you were here, I guess word travels. He assured us she won't say a word, he trusts her and so do I."

“Maggie I can deal with and I trust, Aunt Satan I can’t and don’t.”

“Come on, it’ll be okay. Let’s just face her and be done with it. I’ll stick with you.”

We both stand, and I place Cody on my hip—his little eyes are drooping, and I know he’s well overdue for his nap.

“We can’t be long, he needs to sleep.”

“It’s a good excuse at least.” Ava deadpans.

I smile. “It sure is.”

We walk out of the room and through the back door, and I see Maggie and Mary right away. They’re both standing and talking to Angel and Ace on the porch that overlooks the small yard. When they notice me, they stop talking. Maggie presses a hand to her chest when her eyes fall on Cody. I smile as she rushes over, throwing her arms around me and pulling me close.

“Sweetheart, I’m so glad you’re okay. I was so worried about you.”

“It’s good to see you, Maggie.”

“Let me look at him,” she whispers, pulling back. “Oh, Willow, look at him, he’s just perfect. May I?”

She stretches her arms out, and I smile, handing him over. Mary is by her side now, her eyes scan over Cody as though she’s looking to see if he’s really Jagger’s. She narrows her gaze as she studies him, then she turns her attention to me.

“Willow, good to see you,” she says in a small, cold tone.

“You too,” I manage.

“Johnny’s son is very lovely.”

Johnny’s son? What am I then? His incubator?

Calm down, Willow. Don’t let her get to you.

“Yes, *our* son is lovely.”

She gives me a side-eyed expression. “I see you’ve been speaking with him then?”

I'm assuming she knows, but I'm weary anyway; I'm not telling a single soul about my interaction with Jagger unless absolutely necessary. I don't trust her, and I'm not about to let her know that he knows I'm here.

"No, I haven't."

Maggie looks over at me and our eyes meet, which tells me she knows Jagger and I have seen each other. I'm guessing he has spoken to her but not Mary and I wonder why. Probably the same reasons I don't tell her anything, there is something about her I don't trust.

"I find that very hard to believe. I want to know how my boy is doing?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Really?"

I shrug. "Yes, really."

"Why are you here, then?"

Does she know Jagger is fighting here? If so...how?

Curiosity sparks, but I don't want her here a second longer than she needs to be, so I don't ask.

"Because I wanted to see the guys. I might have strict instruction to stay away from Jagger, but I'm sure as hell allowed to see the rest of my family."

She points her nose to the sky—yes, wicked witch, fly away home.

"Maggie, we have to make the store before it closes," she snaps at Maggie.

Maggie snuggles Cody. "He's so perfect. He looks just like Jagger. I hope we can come visit again soon?"

"Of course, I'd love that. Come over anytime, Maggie."

I made sure I only said Maggie's name, that makes me feel momentarily amazing especially when Aunt Satan glares at me. She hands Cody back, kissing his little face once more.

"You did a great job, Jagger will be so proud."

I smile. "Thank you."

She hugs me again and then they both leave. Mary doesn't even look back as she walks away. God, I can't stand her. I turn to face Ava, and she bursts out laughing. My face breaks into a smile, and soon we're both laughing.

"God she's a piece of work!"

"I know, right? She is the worst."

Still giggling, we both head back into the house. I put Cody down for a nap and while he's asleep, my mother comes over. I've been trying to avoid her as much as possible, but I knew eventually I'd have to face her. Jenny told her we were coming back for a visit, and she was thrilled. When she steps into the house, I see that she looks well. Her eyes are glowing, and she looks radiant. That does make me happy, I want her to be healthy. As soon as she notices me, she comes over with a smile and wraps her arms around me.

It does bring me a moment of comfort.

"How are you, Willow?"

"I'm doing okay. Just settling in."

"Where's my grandson?"

"He's asleep, but he'll be up later."

She frowns. "Oh, well, do you have time for coffee?"

I stare over at Ava who nods and shrugs. I give a half smile. "Sure."

I walk into the kitchen to turn the coffee machine on. My mother perches on a stool and smiles across at me.

"You look like you're doing better."

"Thanks, Mom, as do you," I say, preparing a few cups.

"Where's Jenny?"

"She went out, but she won't be long."

"I met that man she's seeing the other day."

"Oh, Ace?"

“Yes, he’s ... *interesting*.”

I can’t help but grin at the look on her face. She looks mortified, but also curious.

“He’s a good guy,” I tell her. “He’s good to her.”

“He’s very rough, I don’t want her to end up in the same situation as you.”

Ouch. That one hits so hard it almost buckles my knees.

“And what situation is that?” I say, voice hoarse.

She stares at me wide eyed. “Willow, you’re not exactly in a good situation right now, and it’s only because you met Jagger.”

“It’s hardly Jagger’s fault.”

“Well ...”

“Don’t, Mom, you don’t know even half of the story. He’s a good man, and so is Ace, you can’t choose who we date.”

“I just don’t want you to get hurt, those men are no good. There is something about them I don’t trust.”

“Because the man you chose was so much better.”

Her eyes widen, and I immediately regret my words. That was unfair, I know. Ava stares at me, slightly shocked. It was a low blow, I know it was, and I feel immediately bad about it.

“I’m sorry, that wasn’t fair.”

“You just want to punish me,” she says, her eyes filled with anger and hurt. “Don’t you?”

“No, of course not.”

“Then why are we always fighting? I’m trying to build a relationship with you, and you won’t let me.”

“I know, and I appreciate it. I do. But it’s so hard for me right now, I thought you of all people would understand.”

Her face hardens. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t mean it like that,” I exhale. This is what always happens when we talk. “I mean that sometimes things are hard

and we do things we wouldn't usually."

She looks away. "You'll never forgive me, will you? I made a mistake, Willow, and I've paid for it every day since. I don't know what I can say or do to make it better, but I'm trying, which is more than you can say for yourself."

She stands and looks at Ava and me once more before storming out. I sigh and slump against the bench. Ava gets up, her face full of pity, no doubt for my mother and me. It doesn't matter what we do, it always ends like this. I know it's not all her fault; I have a giant wall up when it comes to her, and I struggle to break it down. I can do better, I know I can.

"Willow, honey, isn't it time to let go? You two can't go on forever fighting like that."

I sigh. "I'm trying, Ava, but it's so hard. I know I need to do better, I will do better."

Ava pats my hand. "Right now, things are hard. Everything will get better soon. Don't beat yourself up about it."

"I hope you're right."

We both sit down in silence with our coffee, and a moment later a knock sounds out at the back door. Ava gets up and walks over, opening it to see Angel. He grins and leans forward, kissing her softly, then smiles over at me.

"Hey, Angel, what's up?"

"Have you got a minute?"

I narrow my eyes. "Is everything okay?"

"Sure, where's Jen?"

Why does he want to know where Jenny is?

"She's out at the moment, why?"

He nods his head toward the park over the road. "Come and find out for yourself. Be warned, it'll shock you."

Ava and I exchange confused glances, and I quickly go and lift Cody from his crib into the stroller. He stirs a little but quickly falls back to sleep. We follow Angel towards the park,

and I see Ace sitting beside a man on the park bench. I skid to a halt when I take note of him. I vaguely remember his face, but I'm sure he didn't look like this before. It's Officer Huck, I know that much. I stare at him, really taking him in.

I'm in shock.

How did I not notice this before?

Maybe because I don't remember him that well from the first time I saw him.

I was younger.

I was going through something.

It just didn't seem obvious.

Cody begins to stir and numbly I lean down and pull him into my arms. Ace is beside me in minutes, taking him and steadying me when I sway a little. This is too much.

"Did you know about this?" I whisper.

He shakes his head. "Only Jagger did."

"Jagger?"

"Yes, it's why we haven't seen much of him."

"He knew?"

"Yes."

I swallow and stare at Huck, who stands and walks over to me. God up close he's so much like her. The same eyes. The same face. I knew it as soon as I walked through the door. Huck is Jenny's father. My head swims, and Ava grips my arm, she's silent and staring.

"Did you know?" I whisper hoarsely, my eyes on him.

He nods. "Only for the last few years."

"And you did nothing?" I say, shaking my head.

"Wasn't my place, Willow. Your momma was sick, and ..."

"Jenny had the right to know!"

Huck nods. The only difference between Huck and Jenny is that his hair is medium brown and hers is more like mine and Mom's. Their eyes are that same light green. His skin is creamy just like hers but it's the shape of his face, his expressions, and his build that is nearly identical to her. It's scary. Why don't I remember this? It seems so obvious now. The last time I saw him was when my father died, but my mind was in a different place. The whole thing is foggy.

"I'm sorry. I've tried to stay out of this ..."

"How did Jagger know, and why do you owe him so much?" I cut him off. "You need to start talking."

He nods and points to the chair.

I feel like I'm about to be even more shocked.

It's like it's never ending.



“I met your dad through the academy,” Huck begins. “We graduated together. He met your mom one night up at a club. We all became friends, that was before you were born. He started working more and more, and when you came along your mom was struggling. I used to go over and help her, we were friends, and he wasn’t there. One night, we had a few drinks, and I don’t know, it just happened. There was something between us, something strong.”

I hold my breath. Shocked.

“The affair went on for a while, but things got tough, and we knew it had to end. She left, and we stopped seeing each other. I heard she had another child, but I assumed it was Kane’s, and I knew they didn’t need me around, so I let it be. It was only a few years ago that she told me whose child it was. I was in deep then. I’d become involved in the case that your father was working on with the gang, I had dangerous information. It was risky and a bad time, so I didn’t contact Jennifer.”

“Did my father know?”

He shakes his head. “As you know, he was aware your mother cheated, and that Jenny wasn’t his. He took her on anyway. He didn’t know she was mine, though.”

He did take her on, even though it caused so much pain between the two of them, he stuck around.

I can’t fault him there.

“He was always kind to her, even though she wasn’t his.”

I feel a little bad for my father at this point, but I’m glad he never knew it was someone he trusted so much. Strangely enough, I also understand why my mother had an affair. I remember how lonely it was without him when he was always

working. I can't entirely blame her for wanting to seek comfort.

"Okay," I say, shaking my head. "What about Jagger? How does he fit in all this?"

"Well, when Jagger and his gang originally got busted by your dad and the cops tried to take him down, I helped him. He had information on something I needed, so I made a deal with him. If he gave me the information, I would help him and his gang out of any trouble they got into. Jagger's been good to me, and he's helped me out a lot with my own personal battle. I owe him."

"So you bribed him?"

Huck nods. "It's how it works, isn't it?"

"Right. I don't even want to get into that right now. All I want to know is if you're going to help us."

Huck nods. "Yes, I am."

"And Jenny?"

He looks me right in the eyes. "I was hoping you would help me out with that ..."

"She's going to be heartbroken."

"I know, but I want to know her. Now your mother is out of the institution ..."

"Wait," I say, cutting him off. "You know she's out?"

He nods. "Yes, she contacted me and told me she was out. She told me more about Jenny and how to contact her."

"And you didn't?"

He looks a little guilty. "No. You have to understand, it's quite daunting for me, too."

"Ah, Willow ..."

Ava calls my name, and her voice is hesitant, so I quickly turn to see what's going on. I follow her gaze and see Jenny standing by a car watching us, bag full of groceries, staring at Huck. I know she can see it, I notice the exact moment it

registers and the bags drop from her hands. By now he's looking at her and slowly standing. Ace steps closer to her, but she's already turning, shaking her head. Then she runs.

"I'll go," I say quickly standing. "Watch Cody, please."

I rush after her and manage to catch her just by the swings at the other end of the large park area. By then I'm panting, and I double over, putting my hands on my knees. *Damn, girl can run.* She stops at the swing and lashes out, hitting it with an angry cry. I rush over, wrapping my arms around her, and hold onto her while she yells angrily at no one in particular.

"Calm down, Jen," I say, slowly turning her toward me.

"Did you know?"

I shake my head. "I just found out then."

"All along ... Oh, god ... *all along.*"

I nod, swiping a lone tear away with my thumb. "I'm sorry, Jen."

"Did he know?"

"Only for a few years."

"How did this happen?"

I tell her the story Huck just gave me, as quickly as I can.

Her eyes widen, and then narrow with anger. "I don't know who I hate more: him, your father, or our mother."

"Don't hate any of them. It was a bad time, and they all made mistakes. He wants to see you, to get to know you."

"He could have done that already."

"I know, but it was a lot for him to process, too. Don't hate him until you at least hear him out."

She blinks at me. "We've talked about him so many times and all along he's been that close."

"I know."

"What if I'm not what he expected?"

I know how she feels. It's normal to wonder if she's good enough. If he'll look at her and be proud. She hasn't really had a father figure in her life, and I know she has spent a long time wondering who that man was. Now she knows, she's worried she's not enough.

"He is going to love you because it's impossible not to. Did you see his face? He wants to be in your life, he looked like he was going to cry."

She exhales, her hands shaking. "I ... don't know how to face him. I'm so mad."

"Then don't do it now," I assure her. "Do it whenever you're ready to do it."

"No," she says standing. "I have to do this now."

We walk back slowly, and even though she doesn't say it, she's terrified. She's so nervous, and I don't blame her. This is incredibly overwhelming. When we appear again, Huck stands, and their eyes meet. I feel a crushing feeling in my chest and a touch of jealousy. She has a father that loves her, she has a chance. I swallow down my emotions because this is about my sister now. Huck walks over and stops in front of her, his breathing is labored, too.

"I ... I never ..."

"Can we talk?" Jenny asks, her voice soft.

"Of course."

They turn and walk off down the path, and I feel my shoulders slump. Ace walks over and squeezes my arm. "She'll be fine, you did a good thing keeping your cool and bringing her back here."

"I want to speak with Jagger and find out why he didn't tell me."

"It wasn't his place. Especially not when so much was going down."

I nod, that makes sense. Still, I can't believe he didn't want to share at some point. It's big information.

“Okay. I’m going to take Cody back and rest, he didn’t get enough sleep.”

“Are you sure you’re good?” Angel asks, standing and walking over, placing his hands on my shoulders.

“Yeah, I’m good. I’ll see you all soon, and we’ll go over the next part of the plan.”

“Okay.”

I take Cody and place him in his stroller, then hug Ava one more time before picking up the groceries Jenny dropped and leaving. As I’m walking back to my apartment, I see Jenny and Huck embracing and I’m happy for her. I’m happy because she truly deserves a relationship with her dad. The pain in my chest only worsens with every step I take, though.

I feel so alone.

I know I’m not.

But it doesn’t stop the crushing emptiness in my chest.



“YOU DIDN’T TELL ME,” I say into the phone later that night when Jagger calls.

I’ve been going over everything all afternoon, and I feel a little betrayed that Jagger knew all along and didn’t tell me. I wouldn’t have said anything if he had asked me not to, but it’s big news.

“I’m sorry, but it was dangerous for Jenny. Huck was involved in a lot of bad shit, too, and if anyone found out she was his ...”

“I get that, but you still could have told me. I wouldn’t have said anything.”

“Not my place, baby. You know that.”

I sigh. “I know. Sorry, it has been a long afternoon.”

“How’s Jenny taking it?”

“As far as I know, pretty well.”

I hear him shuffle around a bit before he says, “That’s good.”

“What’re you doing?”

“Just sitting in bed, only time I get to myself.”

“I miss you.”

“Miss you too, baby,” he says in a low, sexy voice that makes my skin prickle and my body heat.

“Cody misses you.”

“Cody doesn’t know me.”

His voice is a little harder now, and it hurts to know that he feels like he’s missing out on his son.

“He will, you know he will.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Time to lighten the mood, I think.

“Hey guess what?”

“Hmmm, what?”

“I’m not sore anymore.”

Silence. A smile breaks out on my face. I haven’t smiled for a few days, and it feels nice.

“Oh?” he says, in a husky tone.

“Oh, and you know what else?”

“What?”

“I’m naked.”

He hisses through his teeth. “Where’s this goin’, baby? Cuz’ the images are doing good things to me.”

“I want you, I can’t have you, so ...”

“So ...”

I lower my voice, so it comes out husky and thick. “I want to hear you cum, thinking of me.”

I hear him swallow. “Fuck, girl, you want me touch myself?”

“Yes.”

“Then you have to return the favor.”

I grin, sliding my hands down my stomach and settling between my legs. “Way ahead of you, baby.”

“I don’t know what made me hardest just now, you touching yourself or you callin’ me baby ...”

I chuckle softly and then moan when I slide my finger over my sensitive clit. It’s hard and swollen already.

“I’m wet.”

“Fuck.”

“What are you doing?” I gasp, rubbing small circles, trying to take it slow.

“Touchin’ my cock.”

I groan, oh the image of his beautiful hands wrapped around that beautiful cock. My body jerks and a bolt of pleasure shoots through me. This isn’t going to last long, I know it already. I miss him too much.

“You like that, don’t you? When I say cock?”

“Yes,” I whimper. “Oh yes.”

“I’m stroking it, slowly. It’s fuckin’ hard, baby, hard for you.”

“More,” I whisper, rubbing myself harder.

“You want me to tell you all the things I’d like to do to you?”

“Yes.”

I slip one finger inside my pussy and groan.

“First, I’m gonna suck those pretty nipples until they’re pink and hard. Then I’m going to slide down that body and find that little pussy and slip my fingers in, using my thumb to make you shudder.”

“Oh, god,” I groan, feeling my release rise higher.

“Then I’m going to lick that sweet pussy, I’m going to make you scream my name. I’m going to feel you cum around my tongue.”

“Jagger, I’m close,” I cry out, arching my hips.

“Then I’m going to slide my cock inside you and fuck you so god damned slowly you’ll cum over and over again with my name on your lips.”

“Oh ... god ...”

“Tell me what you’re doin’,” he grinds out.

“I’m ... oh, rubbing.”

“You got a finger inside that snug little pussy?”

“Yes.”

“Fuck.”

“Tell me, more, I’m so close.”

He makes a ragged sound. “I’m so fuckin’ hard. You want me to cum?”

“Yes!” I whimper, arching and rubbing so hard it almost hurts.

“Fuck, yeah.”

I hear him groan raggedly, and it’s my undoing. I cry out and shudder as bolt after bolt of pleasure shoots through my body. When I slump down onto the bed, I realize I’m clutching the phone tightly as I pant, the sensations slowly slipping away.

“Jagger?”

“Here, baby.”

“That was ...”

“Not as good as having you, but still fuckin’ amazin’.”

I swallow, the sudden urge to cry rising up. I blink it away. We had a wonderful moment, but I am aching for him. I’m aching for him so much it hurts.

“Willow?”

I open my mouth to speak but nothing comes out. Instead the wall breaks and tears fall down my cheeks. God dammit. Why now? I try so hard to keep them back, to stop myself crying, but I can't seem to help myself tonight. My heart aches, my soul is empty, and I need him home. I need him here with me. I just need him.

“Talk to me. Are you okay?”

“I ...”

“Don't cry, baby. It'll get easier.”

His voice is soft and comforting, a tone he rarely uses.

“I want you here!” I choke out. “I can't sleep. I can't eat. I can't function. I don't want to feel like this anymore. I live in constant fear that something will happen to you, and it's consuming me.”

“I know, you know I wish I could change it, but I can't be there.”

“It shouldn't be like this,” I whisper.

“I know.”

“Please, come to me. Just one night.”

“I can't, come on. You know I can't.”

“Jagger, please ...”

He's silent and the faint sound of something in the background has my heart breaking a little more.

“Willow, I have to go. I'm so fuckin' sorry.”

The phone line goes dead before I can say another word. The tears keep coming, as strong as I am, I just can't stop them tonight. I roll into myself and cry until my body aches. The sound of my door creaking a few minutes later alerts me that someone is in my room, and I open my blurry eyes to see Angel sitting by the bed, staring down at me.

“He called. Told me what happened.”

“I want him here,” I whisper. “This is slowly killing me.”

“I know.”

Angel takes my hand, and stares down at me. I close my eyes, trying to squash the pain down. Cody can't see me like this, he can't.

“He was beside himself worryin' about how you were. Mick came and he had to go.”

“He didn't even say goodbye ...”

“I'm sorry.”

I have no doubt he's sorry.

They're all sorry.

I'm sorry.

None of that changes anything.

“I just want to be alone? Can I please be alone?”

Angel stares at me for long moments. “I'll get him back, Willow. I swear it.”

“I hope so,” I whisper, “because my soul can't take much more of this.”

Slowly, little by little, I'm running out of air.

JAGGER



“**Y**ou need more stitches,” Sharleen says, pressing a cloth to my lip.

I grumble. That bastard could hit. Split my lip three different ways. I won all the same. Winning doesn't feel good anymore. It feels blank. Empty. Sharleen removes the cloth and grimaces.

“Want me to do it?” I mutter. “If you can't handle it, pass it over.”

She glares at me, and I return it with full force.

“Don't be a damned asshole.”

I don't answer her. She prepares the needle and thread and then leans in. I hate when she's this close to me. Once I loved it. I couldn't get enough of her but now ... She makes me sick, angry even. Her eyes scan my face, but I refuse to meet them. When she pulls the needle through my lip, I tense. Fuck, I am used to this but it still burns. It burns more than just my lip.

It burns my fucking soul.

“All done,” she says as she ties off after the last thread.

I move out of her way and stand, cracking my knuckles. My shoulders ache, and my head isn't in the game tonight. All I can think about is Willow and how she begged me the other night not to go. I hung up on her, just hung up as though her call meant nothing to me. I'll fucking end this. I have to end this.

I need to go home to my family.

“What's the fucking problem, Jagger?”

I spin to see Mick storming in, shaking his head. His fists are clenched by his sides, and he's red in the face. He's pissed that I didn't put my all in, and I wished I cared about that little fact, but I don't. He can drop dead for all I care.

"What?" I mutter, strapping my hands for the next fight.

"Your head ain't in the game. Get it back in."

"I'm winning, aren't I?"

"You've taken more hits tonight than any other night, winning is hardly the point. Your reputation, *our* reputation, is sinking."

"It's one fucking fight, Mick. Settle down."

He storms over, his blue eyes pierce mine. "It's not one fucking fight, it's everything. I won't tell you again, son, get your head in the game or I'll fucking make you."

I can't wait to make him pay. His day is coming, oh yeah, it's coming. I spin around and head back out to the screaming crowd, sweat dripping down my face as soon as I step into the ring.

Here I go ... again.



WILLOW



I'm just coming back from the store. The sun is setting, and I'm alone. Jenny has Cody at the apartment; she took him so I could go and fetch something for dinner. Ace said it's safe enough for me to go, as long as I'm not at their apartment complex. Of course, it's to be expected that one day I might come and visit them, but mostly, we don't want Mick to know about Cody so it's safer that I stay away. There is a store right near the little house we're in, and I've been assured that I should have no problem going into it.

Still, I can't help but worry.

Mick is likely only watching the guys, he has no reason to look anywhere else. He simply wants to make sure Jagger isn't doing anything he shouldn't be.

I stare at the sunset and sigh, trying to take my mind off the worry. Something so beautiful just isn't special to me anymore. Nothing is, and I hate that. I hate what I've become. I'm just waiting for some cars to pass, so I can cross the street, when suddenly a hand is curling around my arm and pulling me backward. I yelp, but a hand goes over my mouth to prevent me screaming.

"It's me."

Jagger. *Oh god.* I spin around, dropping the groceries, and I leap on him. I wrap my legs around his waist and bury my head into his shoulder. I breathe him in, inhaling deeply. He holds me tight, wrapping his arms around me and pressing me up against a nearby wall. He buries his nose into my hair and breathes me in, just like I'm doing.

"Fuck, I've missed you."

"You came."

I pull back and look at him. He has a black eye and three lots of stitches in his lip. God damn, it's getting worse. One day, he won't make it out of one of those fights, I know it, and he knows it. We have to finish this.

"Jagger," I whisper, stroking his lip.

"It's fine, it'll heal."

I stare at the fading marks on his face and know eventually they'll begin taking over his beautiful face. He narrows his eyes and grips my chin.

"Don't you like me with all these scars?"

His voice is bitter. I snap my head back and take his face in my hands, positioning myself on the ground in front of him.

"I'll love you, no matter what."

He grunts but that very movement looks like it hurts.

"I guess kissing is out?" I frown.

He meets my gaze and leans in so he's nearly touching my lips with his.

"Might be, but I can do plenty of things to make that up to you."

I pout now.

"You picked the worst timing."

He closes his eyes and mutters a curse. "You can't be serious?"

Yep, Aunt Flow is here. She loves to make an appearance when she knows I don't need her. It's like an evil game.

"That has to happen the one time I can see you?"

"Isn't seeing me enough?" I mumble.

"Hey," he says, turning my face to his, "you know it is. I wasn't the only one getting horny."

I chuckle. "No, you weren't."

"Besides, I have things planned."

“Oh, you do, do you?”

He smirks. “I’ve got one night, I’m goin’ to make it count but first, where’s my boy?”

I smile and tell him to meet me around the back of the house. Five minutes later, I’m home and letting him through the back door. Jenny is feeding Cody at the table. When she sees Jagger, she beams.

“You found her?”

“You knew?” I cry, crossing my arms.

“I knew. That’s why I’m taking Cody for the night.”

I give her a look and watch Jagger walk over and scoop him up, covering himself in mashed pumpkin. Jenny laughs, and a huge smile stretches across my face.

“He’ll be fine with me,” she says. “I’ve had him before. I won’t take him anywhere unsafe. Ace found a place for us to stay out of Mick’s sights. He’ll be okay.”

“I know, but I hate leaving him.”

“Willow, you’ve had him twenty-four seven since he was born. You’ve been up the last week with him screaming. You deserve this. He’ll be okay.”

I hesitantly nod, then turn to Jagger who is pressing his nose into Cody’s little neck, just breathing. I smile and go over, tucking my arm around his waist.

“I’m sure he’s grown in a week.”

“He has.”

Jagger’s face hardens just a touch. “I’m missin’ all this.”

“It won’t be forever, it’s going to be fine.”

I hope I’m right.

“I’ll go get an overnight bag ready, let you two spend some time with him,” Jenny says, touching my arm.

Jagger falls onto the sofa, and I flop down beside him. Cody coos and grips his necklace. Jagger smiles as much as his sore lip will allow and strokes Cody’s cheek.

“He’s a good boy, isn’t he?”

“You wouldn’t say that if you had him for the last week.”

Jagger grins. “Listen here, boy, you sleep for your mommy when Da—”

“You can say it,” I urge.

Jagger looks over to me, his eyes are a little lost.

“When Daddy is away,” I finish for him.

“Daddy,” he whispers. “It’s such a sweet, nice word. I’m not sweet and nice, Willow. I’m a fuckin’ monster. If he knew what I do, what I’ve done, he wouldn’t want to look up to me.”

“Wrong,” I say. “You’re strong, brave, and beautiful. You’re everything he needs and more.”

“Maybe.”

“Hey,” I say, forcing him to look at me. “Don’t you start doubting yourself now, Jagger.”

He nods and kisses Cody’s cheeks. “Be a good little man for Mommy, she’s doin’ it tough.”

Cody looks at Jagger, stares him right in the eye. Then he giggles and shoves a fist into his mouth. Jagger snorts.

“Real charmer.”

I laugh. “He’s beautiful.”

Jagger nods. “Yeah, he’s fuckin’ perfect.”

“Language, Black! You have a child here now.”

He gives me a grin that makes me weak at the knees. Jenny reappears with all Cody’s things packed for the night, his little blanket thrown over her shoulder. Jagger looks more than a little hesitant to give him up.

“We can keep him here,” I suggest.

Jagger exhales. “No, you need this as much as I do. I just hate givin’ him up.”

“Why don’t I just take him for a few hours then?” Jenny suggests.

Jagger looks to me, and I nod, then he faces her. “Give us four?”

“Done.”

Jagger hands Cody over, and I stand, kissing him.

“Call me Jen, if you need anything at all.”

“I’m just a few apartments down with Ace, he’ll be fine. Enjoy.”

She leaves, and I stare at the door for a long while. When I turn to look back at Jagger, he’s staring at me. The look on his face is hungry, and when he walks over, he leans down and presses his cheek to mine and whispers in my ear. “Don’t be nervous, I won’t bite.”

I wrap my arms around him and press my body to his. “I hope you do, though.”

He growls and nibbles softly at my neck. His stitches are scratchy, but I don’t care, having him this close makes everything okay. Even just for a second.

“You’re going to have a long, hot shower,” he says against my ear, “and I’m going to start dinner.”

I pull back, grinning up at him. “You’re not going to threaten me so I’ll cook for you?” He narrows his eyes, and I giggle. “Not funny yet?”

“Not quite. You know I never wanted to hurt you.”

“I know. So, you’re going to cook for me? Should I be afraid?”

A ghost of a smile plays around his lips. “You should be very scared.”

I tilt my head to the side and grin prettily at him. “Oh?”

“Get to the shower, before I spank that cute little ass.”

“I’d like that.”

“Go!”

He slaps my backside when I turn and head down the hall. I go the entire way to our room smiling, and, for the first time in a while, it's real.

WILLOW



I shower and shave everything, then I dress in some light shorts and a tank top. I'm grateful my period is pretty much over but pissed it's not over enough to have a good time with Jagger. When I walk out into the kitchen, I smell food cooking, and my stomach grumbles for the first time in days. Jagger is standing in the kitchen squinting at a piece of chicken, he looks so god dammed beautiful standing there like that, and, for a moment, I see a glimpse of our future together.

His black shirt is stretched across his chest and his black jeans are just tight enough to let the imagination roll. I walk over and stop behind him, wrapping my arms around his waist. He pats my hand and then continues staring at the chicken. I want to ask him if he wants help, but, somehow, I know that won't do his ego any favors, so I just snuggle into him from behind. He spins around a moment later, takes my hips, and turns me so I'm pressed against the bench. Then he lifts me and deposits me down onto it and nestles himself between my legs.

"You smell amazing. It's testin' my self-control."

"I could always get on my knees and suck you while you cook."

His eyes widen and grow lusty. "Baby, I'd love that, but I have this all planned out and ..."

"Oh, do you now?"

He grins. "I do."

"What's the plan?"

"That's a secret."

“Oh?”

“Yeah oh, now sit there and look pretty while I cook.”

“What’re you cooking?”

He smiles at me. “Secret.”

“Lots of secrets tonight, Mr. Black.”

“You know it,” he says, focusing his attention back on the chicken.

I watch him slice it followed by some mushrooms, then he tosses them into a pan, and I realize what he’s making. I’ve made it for him a few times, and he always loves it so much. My creamy tomato chicken with mushrooms.

I smile. “Creamy tomato chicken.”

He looks up at me. “Jenny told me how to do it, but I’m not sure I’m gettin’ it right.”

“You are.”

“Don’t fancy helpin’?”

“Oh no, this one is yours, big man.”

He grunts and continues cooking. I’m enjoying every second.

“So, Ace told me Huck has gotten some explosives ready,” Jagger says, stirring the chicken.

I raise my brows. “Oh?”

“I’m goin’ back next week. I’ll take them then.”

“Oh.”

He stops stirring and turns to me. “It’s just for a few days. Week tops.”

“Okay, I guess I can live with that.”

He gives me that gorgeous half-smile and turns back to his cooking. I slide off the counter and set the table for him. When the food is ready, we both sit down. He stares at the dish and looks at me cautiously as I take a mouthful. Oh yum. The

creamy tomato sauce is beautiful, and the pasta is perfect. He actually did an incredible job.

“Oh, Jagger, this is actually really amazing.”

“Are you just sayin’ that?”

“Try it for yourself and see.”

He hesitantly takes a mouthful, and his eyes widen. I grin at him and take another spoonful. I’m starving. I’ve hardly eaten. In fact, I don’t think I have eaten much at all for the last week. It’s worrying, and I know I’m losing weight. I finish my meal without thought, and look up to see Jagger watching me, his expression narrowed.

“Hungry?”

I give him a sheepish smile and look down. “Sorry, I haven’t eaten.”

“You’re not eating?” he interrupts.

“I do, but, just not enough.”

“You should be eating, Willow.”

“I am, it’s just hard.”

He narrows his eyes like he wants to argue, but stiffly nods instead. When he’s finished, he stands and clears the plates. I stand too, and am just about to turn around when he presses himself up against my back. One arm wraps around my waist and he leans into my ear.

“Shut your eyes.”

“Why?”

“Just do it.”

I shut my eyes and his fingers slide up and over my lips. I lean my head back into his shoulder and sigh as he slides his finger gently over my face.

“Open your mouth.”

I part my lips and feel him slip a square of chocolate into my mouth. I groan as it melts on my tongue. He rubs a little of the chocolate over my lips and then slips his finger into my

mouth once more. I suck it gently and he makes a ragged sound behind me. His erection is pressing into my backside, and he's hard as stone. I moan when he slips more chocolate into my mouth, this time he spins me around and leans down, gently sliding his tongue out to lick the chocolate from my lips.

I want him. I want him so bad it hurts.

"I want you, Jagger," I whimper.

"Do you trust me, baby?"

"Yes, you know I do."

"Then you'll have me."

I open my eyes and look up at him, "How?"

He takes my hand and leads me down the hall and into the main bathroom. I look at him, confused. Does he think we'll have sex in the shower? Because I'm still not okay with that. I open my mouth to protest, but he cuts it off with his finger to my lips. I scan his face, and my eyes settle on his.

"Trust me."

He steps forward and takes my tank top, sliding it over my head. He hisses when he sees I'm wearing no bra. Okay, if he wants to torture me, he's going the right way about it. He reaches for my shorts, and I stop him.

"I just showered and ..."

"You're showering again, this time for fun. I'll turn. You do what you have to do and get into the shower. No arguments."

He turns, not giving me a chance to protest. I quickly strip my clothes off and make sure I'm clear of all protection before slipping into the shower. I keep darting my eyes down to make sure there's no blood, and while I can't see any this isn't really something I want to do. It's awkward. Jagger steps in a moment later, naked, and I forget about my period. That body. I reach out for his chest but he catches my hand.

"Ah ah, my way, baby."

“That’s not fair.”

“Life’s not fair. Turn around.”

He spins me around so I’m facing the wall and then he reaches around and cups my breasts in his hands, gently kneading them. I groan and rest my forehead against the wall, taking in the delicious sensations of his fingers gently stroking my nipples. He leans down and gently grazes his lips over my neck, and I shudder.

“Can I touch you?” he murmurs.

“I ... I ...”

“I need you aroused.”

“But ...”

“Only your clit.”

Fuck, when he says that, how can I say no? I nod, and he slides his hand down and finds my clit. He gently strokes it with one hand while the other teases my nipple. I groan and press myself back into him and find he’s hard and hot against my backside. I click as to exactly what it is he’s doing here. I lurch forward but he catches me with an arm around my waist.

“I won’t hurt you, I promise.”

“I don’t know ...”

“If you want me to stop, I’ll stop. No questions asked.”

“Will it hurt?”

“Let me try?”

I nod. I’m nervous, but I trust him, and, more than that, I need him. He presses a light kiss to my neck, then turns and steps out of the shower for a moment. When he comes back, he’s got a tube in his hand. I stare over at it and swallow. His eyes flash to mine and he gives me a reassuring look. I let my eyes move down over his erection and I lick my lips. I want him. All of him.

“Put your hands on the wall, baby,” he murmurs, and I turn slowly, putting my hands on the wall. “Yeah, like that.”

I part my legs slightly. He steps behind me and uses his foot to widen my stance. When he's pressed up behind me again, I shudder.

"The water won't wash this off, it's water resistant. I'll make this as easy as I can."

I nod, biting my lip. His hands slide over me, gently stroking my skin. He finds my clit again and he begins gently stroking, licking my neck as he does. I clench and groan, feeling pleasure building inside me. When his finger slides around to *that* area, I tense.

"I got you."

He carefully pushes a finger inside me, and I shift, uncomfortably. I'm not entirely sure I like the sensation, but I don't make him stop. He's very gentle. He strokes my clit, bringing my pleasure back to the edge once more. I moan when he begins moving his finger, and soon both his hands are working me over. I whimper as I am close to orgasm, and oh, I need him inside me.

He slowly moves his finger away, pressing his cock to the same place.

I hold my breath.

"You say stop, I'll stop."

He slides in a little, and I whimper. A stretching, burning sensation washes over me, and I shift uncomfortably. He continues working my clit, rubbing and pinching until I'm gasping with need. He pushes in a little further and a feeling of fullness washes through me. Then, with one more gentle thrust, he's inside me. I cry out, pain shoots through my body, and the feeling isn't something I think I'll enjoy.

"It'll get better."

He continues playing with my clit, working me in a way that takes the pressure off. When I feel myself racing toward orgasm again, he begins to slowly move. The feeling is very different, not quite as pleasurable, but very erotic all the same. He's gentle with me, rocking his hips in a perfectly slow

motion while he rubs my clit with his fingers. He wraps an arm around my waist and thrusts his hips a little deeper.

“Fuck, this won’t last long, baby. Cum for me.”

His movements become a little more precise, and I’m so close, God, I’m so close. He quickens, and I tip over the edge. I cry out as an orgasm tears through me, the feeling is quite sensational, and very different to a vaginal orgasm. It feels amazing all the same. Jagger growls, and I can feel every pulse of his cock as he releases inside my body.

My legs are jelly by the time he slows down and pulls back a little.

“You okay?”

He’s supporting me with his arm still around my waist and my legs refuse to work. I’m comfortably numb and loving it. Pulling out fully, he scoops me up and carries me out of the shower, wrapping a towel around me and putting me down onto the bed. He strokes a thumb over my mouth, his eyes so intense it’s hard to look away.

“You good?” he asks again.

“Yeah, I’m okay.”

“Are you sore?”

“A little,” I admit. “But, I liked it.”

He pulls back and looks down at me. “You did?”

“Yeah, it was different.”

He smiles and strokes my cheek. “Ready for the rest of your surprise?”

I reach up and swipe a thick piece of dark hair from his eyes. “Anything you have for me, I’m ready for.”

He stands and looks lovingly down at me, and then he tosses me some clothes. “Get dressed.”

I raise my brows. “We’re going out? Is it safe?”

“It is. Trust me. Come on.”

I grin and get dressed. Then I run a brush through my hair and put it up in a messy bun. When Jagger's dressed too, I follow him out the front door and over to the main complex. He leads me around the back, and I'm confused for a moment, until we step onto the tennis court that sits abandoned behind this house. It has been lit up with a bunch of party lights and in the middle is a beautiful, round dance floor. It's wooden and a perfect circle. It's surrounded by flowers and pretty lights. It reminds me of something you would see at a prom for the king and queen to dance on.

"We're dancing?" I whisper.

"We're dancing, baby, just me and you."

I swallow and my heart clenches. It's so beautiful, so romantic, and so perfect. Jagger takes my hand and leads me over to the dance floor, and we walk up the few steps. When we're standing in the middle, I look around. Truly magical. The night is clear and warm, there's soft music playing in the background and we're alone.

"How'd you do this?" I whisper.

"Rusty and Bull helped me out."

I look up at him. "Your gang members helped with you with a romantic gesture?"

"Shhh." He grins. "Don't go ruinin' my reputation. Will you dance with me?"

"I'd love to."

A song plays softly on the stereo, and I melt. Jagger wraps me in his arms, and I slide my hands up around his neck. Gently he begins to sway us, our bodies moving softly to the music. His eyes never leave mine. It's that perfectly beautiful moment that makes everything okay again. It's the moment that makes all bad things good. It's that moment that makes us who we are. It's the moment that just changes everything. It makes me want to keep going, to keep fighting. It makes the distance easier. It just is, *that moment*.

"You did all this for me?" I ask, my fingers twirling the hair at the base of his neck.

“I’d do anything for you, Willow. Anything.”

He lets me go, and I’m confused for a moment, then he drops to his knees. My eyes widen and tears burst forth and roll down my cheeks. He reaches up and takes my hand, and then he pulls a tiny ring out of his shirt pocket. It’s perfect, beautiful, and when he holds it toward me, I gasp and sob all at the same time.

“I haven’t been around, I haven’t done everything I can to make this perfect for you. I took you, I changed your life in good and bad ways. I have taken you to hell and back, and I know there’s no reason that I would deserve someone like you. I don’t deserve you, but I’ll never, ever want anything in my life the way I want you. You’ve changed everything I am. You’ve made me want to be so many things I never thought I could be. You’ve become the reason I wake up every day. You’re my heart, my soul, and the reason I breathe. I don’t deserve you to say yes to me, Willow, but I’m asking you to. I’m asking you to say yes because without you, I am nothing. Without you, I have no soul. I can’t give you much right now, but I can give you my heart and promise you that I’m always going to fight. I promise you I’ll always come back, I’ll always believe in you and, Willow, I’ll always love you. Marry me, let me give you all of me.”

Jagger is looking at me with those beautiful blue eyes, his face full of emotion, desperation, but, mostly, love. I drop to my knees too, and I take his face in my hands.

“Yes, oh my, Jagger. Yes.”

He slumps in relief, and we crash into each other’s arms, both of us clinging to each other like it’s the last time we ever will. When we finally pull back, he slides the ring onto my finger, and it’s a perfect fit. It’s a beautiful square cut diamond, with a white gold band. It’s everything. Clapping sounds come from the darkness, and I turn to see everyone walking out, beaming. I smile at all of them—my family, my life. They’re our glue.

I stand and rush over, reaching Jenny first and throwing my arms around her. She squeals and jumps up and down, Ava

is sobbing, and the boys are clapping Jagger on the back. It's the most incredible moment of my life.

Until it isn't.



WE'RE ALL STANDING, living in the blissful moment, hugging and laughing, when a voice comes from the darkness. It's a voice I recognize, and I'm immediately tense when I hear it.

“Jagger?”

We all pause and turn to see Mary step into the light, she must have come to my house to see me, and heard the noise. Why would she be coming to see me at this time of the night? My stomach tightens. Her eyes fall on Jagger and widen. “What're you doing here?”

I don't know why, but a cold chill creeps through me. What is she doing here? I don't understand. It can't be for a good reason. Jagger walks over and embraces her, and she wraps herself around him, immediately pulling out the fakest sounding sob I've ever heard. Something is most certainly wrong, so when he starts telling her what's happening, I call his name to stop him. He turns to look at me, confused.

“Can we talk for a second?”

He narrows his eyes, but nods. I lead him into the darkness away from Mary. “Jagger, I don't trust her.”

“What?”

“I can't explain it, but I don't trust her. Something feels wrong. I feel it with every ounce of my body.”

“I know you don't get along, but she wouldn't hurt me. She's like my mother. Are you sure you're not just feeling extra concerned because of everything that's going on?”

“Why is she here at this time of the night, hiding in the darkness?”

He sighs. “She probably just heard talking and came over, maybe she wanted to see Cody again.”

“Jagger, please, if you trust me with anything at all, trust me with this. I don’t trust her, and I don’t think you should tell her your plans.”

“That woman practically raised me. I know you two don’t get along, but I don’t think she’d do anything to hurt me.”

“Please?”

“Don’t put me in this position, please?”

“Do you love me, Jagger?”

His eyes harden, just a touch. “You fuckin’ know I do. I just asked you to be my wife.”

“Then can you at least keep your plans from her? Please, for me and Cody, can you do that?”

“You’re askin’ me to make a choice that’s goin’ to hurt her.”

“No, I’m asking you to just be careful.”

“She hates Mick more than you do. I promise you, she doesn’t mean any harm.”

Then he turns and disappears, not letting me say another word. I rub my arms. Something is not right. Something is not right at all.

JAGGER



It has been three days.

Three days since I've spoken to Willow.

We had a huge fight over Mary when she found out I told her about our plans to end Mick. She's overreacting, I know why, and I understand it, but I can't seem to get her to believe that Mary isn't a monster. I've had her in my life forever, she'd never hurt me. I've tried calling, but she is refusing to answer. I had to come back, and I didn't even get to say goodbye to her or Cody. It's killing me, but I can't make her talk to me.

I can only do my best to finish this as soon as possible so I can get home to her.

"Jagger."

I turn to see Sharleen walk into the room I'm in; it's the only room in this fucking place that has a bar. She sits beside me and orders a drink from our personal bar attendant. Mick doesn't do anything in halves, he always has to have the best of the best with the money I provide.

"What do you want?" I mutter, taking a shot of whiskey.

"Can't we even talk? Can't we even try to get along?"

"You lied, cheated, and oh, yeah, let my father take my girl—sure, what do you want to chat about?"

She flinches. "I had no choice."

I look her dead in the eye. "There's always a choice."

She glares at me. "Then why are you here, Jagger? Sometimes there isn't a choice, sometimes you do what you

have to.”

Dammit, the woman is right about that. I hate her more for that.

“I know you hate me, you have every right to, but I don’t see why we can’t get along.”

“I’m not here to make friends.”

She rubs her head angrily. “I’m not asking to be your friend, I’m just asking that we don’t snap and snarl at each other all the time.”

“Fine.”

“Jagger ...”

I spin on her. “What do you want from me, Sharleen? You fucked me over, end of story. I can’t be nice to you, I can’t be what you want me to be. I’m in love with someone else, and I’ll do whatever I can to protect her. I don’t trust you, or my father, or anyone else in this damn place.”

“I heard ... I heard you have a son.”

I round on her so quickly she drops her glass, and it shatters on the counter, splashing liquid everywhere. “What did you say?”

“I ... I saw a notice in an old paper here. I saw his birth notice.”

Why don’t I trust that?

She’s a fucking liar, that’s why.

“Did you tell anyone?”

She shakes her head. “No, of course not.”

“I don’t know if it’s true or not. I asked the guys, but nobody will confirm or deny,” I lie.

“It must be hard, I know how much you wanted kids.”

“Well, I can’t change it because I’m stuck fighting to keep them safe from my fucked up father.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I don’t know if I believe that, Sharleen.”

She sits in silence beside me for a few more minutes. When I get up to pee and return, I find that she hasn’t moved. There’s a fresh drink on the counter. I sit down and take it, drinking it as she begins trying to talk to me. The woman won’t get a hint. Soon though, my head is fuzzy and I’m easing up. I haven’t felt like this for a while, I guess whiskey was what I needed. I lick my lips a few times, but they feel a little numb. I’ve had too much.

“You okay?” Sharleen asks, but it sounds slurred, almost as if it’s coming from a distance.

“Yeah, all good. Goin’ to bed.”

I stand and stumble backward. Fuck, I’ve had far too much. Sharleen stands and grips my arm, helping me down the hall. I don’t even have the strength to fight her off.

“How much did you drink?”

“Fucks me.”

She leads me to my room, but by the time we’re there my vision is almost completely blurred. Something’s just not right about this. I don’t feel right. My legs are heavy, and my eyes are drooping. I try to reach for my face, but I can’t get my hand to work.

“Let’s get you laying down.”

I can hear Sharleen’s voice, I can even feel her taking my clothes off but I can’t stop her. When she’s lying on top of me, kissing my neck and fumbling with my jeans, I try to push her away, but I can’t move my hands more than an inch. My fucking body is dead, and I can’t control it, no matter how hard I try.

“Get off me,” I try, but I don’t know if my words come out clearly at all.

“Shhh, it’s going to be okay.”

The fuck? I try to move, but I’m numb. I’m lifeless. Sharleen has my cock in her hand, and I can’t get her off me. I can’t even buck my hips to send her flying. She leans down

and makes a groaning noise and wraps my arms around her. I can't move them. She buries her head into my shoulder, and I see a bright flash go off before everything goes black.



WILLOW



It's been a week. I haven't seen him. Angel said the plan is going ahead and they've gone to the island as far as he knows. He tried calling for a few days, but I ignored it. After our huge fight, I chose not to speak to him for a bit. I hate the way that makes me feel, but he wasn't hearing me out. I told him not to tell Mary everything, and he did it anyway. That was like a slap in the face. He made a choice, and it wasn't me.

That hurt.

But still, not hearing from him is concerning.

It's late afternoon, and the sun is beginning to set. I'm taking Cody for an afternoon walk in his stroller when I hear my name being called. Chills creep up my spine when I recognize that voice. *Mick*. I want to run, but at the same time I can't act like I have any reason to hide, I could simply be here visiting family, so I turn slowly and stare at him. He's approaching me with a wide grin on his face. I feel sick, but I keep my face straight, even though everything inside me is screaming at me to get the hell out of there.

Stopping in front of me, his blue gaze drops to Cody.

"Well, I'll be damned. I do have a grandson."

How does he know about Cody? My blood runs cold.

It's Mary. Everything inside me is screaming that she told him I'm here. The guys made too much effort to ensure I was safe, and he just finds me? This easily? No, someone had to have told him.

"What do you want?" I say, my voice hard. "You said you wouldn't bother me if you got Jagger."

"Yes, I did say that, but I don't have Jagger, do I? Why, my boy has been sneaking off to see his lady and baby. I don't

know how stupid you all think I am, but I can tell you that you underestimated me.”

My entire world feels like it stops spinning.

“Where is he? If you hurt him, I swear to god ...”

Mick laughs. “Jagger’s fine, better than fine actually. You didn’t really think he was coming back to you, did you? The only reason he was seeing you was because of guilt.”

I know what he’s trying to do, and it won’t work.

“You’re wrong about that.”

“Am I? Where has he been the last week, Willow? Why hasn’t he come to see you. He could have, because we’re still here, but he hasn’t bothered to come to you. That’s because he knows it’s not worth it. He knows where he belongs and no matter how hard you pull, he’ll always come back to me.”

“You’re wrong about that,” I seethe.

“Trust me, I’m not. He’s been very busy ...”

I don’t know what he’s talking about.

“Why are you here? Just leave me alone. I’ve done everything you asked. You’ve got Jagger, just leave me and my son alone.”

“It’s because of the boy that I’m giving you this chance. Leave Willow, stay away from my son, and I’ll let your son have his mother.”

“I can’t just leave, I live here and ...”

“No, you don’t. You moved away and you’re going to go home, leave Jagger and end it or, I’ll make you pay. I know what you and your little friends are planning, you won’t get near my island. You even try and that little boy of yours will find himself in some trouble.”

“You touch him, and I’ll kill you myself,” I growl.

Mick smirks, as if I’m nothing more than a pathetic little woman. “Thought you’d say that. So, let me try something else, why stay when he doesn’t want you? My son might love

you, but he knows it'll never be. He made a choice this week, and you need to accept it and move on."

"He loves me, nothing you can say will change that."

Mick digs through his pockets and tosses a picture at me. "Well, he has a funny way of showing it."

I stare down at the picture I caught in my hand, and my world stops. I feel my vision blur for a moment, and my whole body becomes hot and cold all at the same time. In the picture I see a couple. The woman is on top of the man and his arms are around her. She's got her face buried in his neck and her naked back is on view for the world to see. I can clearly see he's naked too, but the bottom half is covered with a sheet. His eyes are closed, and his mouth is opened in pleasure. That couple is Sharleen and Jagger.

"This is old. I know what you're trying to do," I whisper, my voice far too weak.

Mick laughs. "Look at the stitches in his lip. Now, I know you've seen him lately so you and I both know that's recent."

I stare closer and sure enough, the exact same stitches are in Jagger's lip. I drop the picture to the ground and my heart pounds against my ribcage. I can't hear anything, I can't feel anything. Cody begins to cry, but I'm too numb to get him. From head to toe, I'm numb. Mick is laughing, but all I can hear are my ears ringing loudly. When I can focus enough to hear Mick, I manage to get his last words.

"Leave, take your son. I'm giving you a chance only because that boy is my grandson. Leave, Willow, and don't come back."

Then he's gone, and I'm on the sidewalk trembling.

"Willow?"

I don't know how long I've been standing there, shaking, with Cody crying in the background, but a voice slowly creeps in.

"Willow? Hey, Willow."

Someone slaps my cheek a little, but I don't feel like I can move or function. All I can see is her body on his, his arms around her, the way his mouth was slightly open with pleasure. I can see it all, and it won't leave.

“Willow?”

I turn slowly, realizing it's my mother standing before me. Her expression is that of concern.

How long have I been standing here?

“Honey, are you okay?”

I sway again and my mother calls out for help while hanging onto my arm. I feel a hard set of arms wrap around me a moment later, just before my world goes black.

JAGGER



Why the fuck won't she answer? I've been trying, and she won't answer. I don't know what the hell is happening. I don't even know if she's okay. A few days I can understand, but this long? No. I decide to take the risk and call Angel, I need answers. When he doesn't answer his phone, I try Ace. He answers on the third ring, and he speaks quietly, something is off. His voice sounds distant, and he is speaking to me oddly. Then he asks a question that stumps me.

“Why, dude?”

“What?”

“Why'd you do it?”

What the fuck is he talking about?

“I don't know what you're talkin' about. Where's Willow? Why isn't she answering my calls?”

“She knows, Jagger. She knows what you did.”

“What are you fuckin' talkin' about, Ace?”

“How could you? She's fuckin' been by your side, she has waited, she has fuckin' broken for you.”

“Ace!” I roar. “What're you talkin' about?”

“Mick showed her a photo, Jagger. She saw you in bed with Sharleen.”

What? My mind spins. In bed with Sharleen? How? Maybe he has an old photo, that sick son of a bitch. He would use something like that to get to me.

“It was probably old, I haven't ...”

“It was recent, you had those damn stitches in your lip. I saw it with my own fuckin’ eyes.”

What the fuck is going on?

“Ace, put her on now.”

“I can’t.”

“Put her on,” I roar, “or so help me god, I’ll gut you.”

Ace sighs, and I hear shuffling, arguing and Willow’s quiet refusal. How could this happen? I close my eyes, and it hits me hard and fast. That night I thought I was drunk, Sharleen took me to my room. That bright light I saw was a fucking camera. Those fucking bastards. I couldn’t have fucked anyone that night if I tried, but I didn’t know if I can convince Willow of that. Fuck, what have they done?

“Jagger,” Willow’s voice comes across the phone broken and silent. “Don’t call me again. I don’t want to talk to you. We’re done. Leave me alone.”

“Willow, listen to me, I—”

“You what?” she cries, “You didn’t do it? You didn’t mean it? You were drunk? High? What Jagger? I saw it with my own eyes, nothing you can say will take that away. I saw it!”

“I know what it looks like, but if you’ll just listen ...”

“I’m done listening. I gave up everything for you. What was this to you, Jagger? A way of protecting yourself? Or maybe you just enjoy playing with two women? We’re done. I’m leaving and taking my son with me. Don’t call me again.”

“Do not hang up—”

She’s gone. Ace gets back on, and I’m panting with rage, still bellowing for her to answer.

“Sorry, boss, but this time we’re going to stick with her. She needs us.”

“Ace,” I rasp. “Fuck it, man, just listen to me. They drugged me. Do you hear me? You know me, you know I would never hurt her. I was drugged. This is all part of his

plan. He wants to fuck with her, to fuck with me. Fuck, you know me, brother.”

Ace is silent a long, long moment. “I don’t know what I believe, I honestly don’t. I didn’t think you would do that—”

“I didn’t!” I snarl, cutting him off. “I’d never hurt her. They’re fuckin’ trying to get you all to stop what you’re doing. They’re trying to scare her off. Don’t let her run, Ace, let me fix this.”

“Even if I believe you, man, it’s too dangerous now. Mick threatened her and Cody, she’s not going to risk it. He knows about the island. He knows about our plan. He knows it all. It’s risking her life.”

“How?” I ask through gritted teeth.

“I don’t know. He’s expecting us to do something. We can’t get explosives over, he’ll be waiting for it, he’ll be looking for everything. He will see us bringing explosives.”

“Maybe,” I say, with new determination. A new desire to end this. “But we can put one big explosive down in the right place, finish as many of them as we can.”

“How? He’ll have the place monitored.”

“Easy. I’ll plant it. I’ll build it while I’m there and plant it.”

“Dude, that’s risky.”

“I need to fix this. I need her to know it wasn’t me. Trust me, the plan still goes ahead. I won’t let him fuck with my life any longer.”

“Fine, but she needs out of it. Her life is in danger, Jagger, she can’t be involved. We need to keep her clear of it.”

“I have to tell her I didn’t do it.”

“No, it’s too risky. Let her hurt, it’s more realistic that way. We’ll make sure she doesn’t run, but if she knows it wasn’t you then she’s back in a dangerous situation. Trust me, let her believe it for now.”

“It’ll break her,” I growl.

“No, she’s strong. Stronger now than she’s ever been. We’ll get the plan moving and finish this so you can come back to her. You can fix it then. Let us keep her safe until you can.”

“I’m going to the island tomorrow. I’ll have the bomb done in two days. We blow next Thursday.”

“That’s soon.”

“I’m done waiting. I’ll organize a boat to get the girls out on. You guys just need to get here. I’ll tell you how to do that soon, right now I have to go.”

“Fine, we’ll be in touch.”

“Ace?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t let her run.”

“Yeah, man, I won’t.”

Fuck, I hope we’re doing the right thing.



WILLOW



I *t burns.*

My heart burns. I can't stop the image from swirling around in my brain. I can't move it from my mind. It's there, day in, day out, haunting me. I have cried so much there's nothing left. I can't get the pain to leave my heart, it hurts every damn day. Every single agonizing second. It has been three days since Jagger called, and the guys have gone off to help him. They told me they were going ahead with the plan, because they owed him that, but after they assured me that I would have their support until I knew what I wanted to do.

Ava and Jenny are with me, both have been made to ensure I don't run while they're gone. Where would I run to? Right now, I've got nothing to run with. Cody is restless and cries every night, I know he's picking it up from me and I hate that I'm doing that to him. I hate that I let myself slip and fall for Jagger's charms. I should have known. I should have always known that Sharleen would be a problem. He loved her. That doesn't just fade.

Part of me tries to justify his actions. He's alone, he's unhappy, he's numb. She's there when I'm not. She helps him and has helped him with all his fights. I try to justify it, but it makes me feel no better. Part of me wonders if all along he's been seeing her. The phone call a few weeks ago, seeing her at the fight with him. He told me he did that on purpose to scare me off, but did he? I don't know what to believe anymore.

Everything is a mess.

Ava walks into the living room where I'm standing, staring out the window. I stand here a lot, just staring into nothingness. Everything feels like it's moving around me, but my world has just stopped. Nothing is moving forward, it feels as though I'm living the same day over and over again. I know

I need to do something, because if I don't, I'm going to keep going around and around in this circle and I can't move on if I stay here, living like this.

Putting a hand to my shoulder, Ava's voice comes out whispered. "How are you feeling today, honey?"

I shrug, not looking at her. "Same as yesterday, but I've decided today I'm going to do something about it."

"Willow, you know they don't want you involved."

I put my hand up, slowly turning to face her. "I'm not getting involved, but I need to find out something. I need to know how Mick found out about our plans and I know exactly where to start."

"Mary."

I nod. "I'm going to talk to her. I have to confront her. She could have killed her own nephew. She needs to know that."

"Are you sure that's wise?" Ava asks, narrowing her eyes.

"Nothing you say can change my mind. I want to go home, but before I can do that, I need answers. I need to know I wasn't crazy for not trusting her. Can you watch Cody for an hour? It won't take long."

"Willow..."

I reach out, placing my hands on her shoulders. "I have to do this."

"Ok," she sighs, "I'll watch him, but you need to be careful. Please."

"I will be. Cody's sleeping, he probably won't wake up but if he does, he'll be due for a bottle."

She nods and I give her a small smile before turning and finding my keys and checking on Cody. When I reach my car, I type Mary's address into my phone. I know it, because I have sent a few pictures of Cody in the past, trying to do the right thing. I've never been to visit her before, and for good reason. I don't trust Mary and I've been certain she is up to something from day one.

It takes me about twenty minutes to make it to her house, and when I arrive, I stare out the window at the large, grand white home she lives in. It's bigger than I thought, though I'm not surprised considering just how much she likes to walk around acting like money falls from her backside.

Taking a deep breath, I get out of the car.

I walk up the front pathway and past some beautiful gardens. The house has a beautiful large porch out the front and it's quite spectacular. I reach the large, brown door and raise my hand to knock when I hear voices inside. Lowering my hand slowly, my heart jumps into my throat. I know those voices. I know them all too well. It's Mick and Sharleen.

I knew it.

I always fucking knew it.

Taking a deep breath to gather myself, I step to the side very slowly and peer through a small window beside the door. It's blurred, so I can't see much, but I can hear better. The shadows of three people can be made out through the glass, and my heart breaks into a tiny thousand pieces knowing this would destroy Jagger. It would truly crush him.

He trusts her.

Even when I told him I didn't, he always did.

"He won't get hurt," Mick says, his voice gruff and low.

"I don't know, Mick. What if he refuses to leave?" Mary asks in the same precise, perfect tone she always uses.

I hate her.

I hate her so much it burns into my very soul.

"He won't. He has a fight. He'll get off the island and when he does, we'll end it."

End it?

End what?

What are they talking about?

“Are you sure this is what you want to do?” Mary asks.
“That island is your life’s work, *our* life’s work.”

“They’re going to find a way to do something that’ll destroy everything. I need to start again somewhere else. It’s better to end it and them, considering they want to go ahead with their little fuckin’ plan. They can go down with it.”

No.

No.

“How can you be sure you’ve got enough explosives?”

“I’ve planted them all over the island,” Mick answers, as if he’s simply talking to an old friend over coffee. “When I press that button, it blows.”

“And you’re sure they’ll all be there?”

“I’m sure, those stupid fuckers are already on their way. I have eyes everywhere,” Mick chuckles, “and they thought they could pull the wool over my eyes.”

No.

This is bad.

This is really bad.

Mick is going to take the guys out while they’re on the island. He’s two steps ahead of them. They’re all going to die, and Mary is helping him do it. Rage, unlike anything I’ve ever felt grips my chest, and my hands begin to tremble as I frantically try to figure out a way to warn them.

“Jagger could get hurt. It’s risky,” Sharleen mutters, finally speaking.

As if she cares about Jagger – she only wants to make him believe she does. Sharleen only truly cares about one person, and that’s herself and her needs.

“It’s a risk I’ll take. If he doesn’t get off tonight, I’m blowing it anyway. I can find another fighter, but I can’t keep this going if I get busted.”

“You said you wouldn’t hurt him!” Mary snaps.

Did she honestly trust Mick? Did she really think he would take care of her precious nephew?

“Mary, this isn’t your concern. I’ll do what I have to do, and you’ll do best not to interfere.”

“What about Willow?” Mary mutters, almost defeated. “She still knows everything. She’s not going to just lay down when she finds out they’re all dead. She’ll be a problem.”

“Willow thinks Jagger fucked Sharleen. She believed that stupid photo was real. She won’t go back to him, even if he gets off the island before it blows. She’s hurt. We made sure that she never wants to see Jagger again.”

Oh.

My.

God.

Jagger wasn’t lying.

All along this was their plan.

How could I have believed that photo was real? How could I have truly thought that Jagger would do that to me?

Pain and guilt slam into my chest, and I feel like gripping my hair and screaming at how stupid I am.

“She could get over that hurt,” Sharleen points out. “It might take a while, but she has his son. She will get over it and when she does, she’ll want answers.”

“I made it real, Sharleen. That photo we got when Jagger was out is so believable even I had to double check. Trust me when I say she isn’t going to get over that anytime soon, now with their rocky history. If she didn’t have my grandson, I’d finish her, too. Without that gang around, she’ll fade off and if for some reason she doesn’t, I’ll deal with her.”

“She’s onto me,” Mary points out. “She suspects me, I know she does.”

Mick grunts. “I don’t think she’s thinking about you right now.”

So many things are swirling around in my mind, but mostly, it's rage. Rage at all of these people who were meant to love Jagger, and yet each of them chose to betray him. For money, for power, for love, I don't know but they still did it and they're going to pay. I'm going to make sure of it.

They won't get away with this.

Not this time.

"Ok, so for now Willow is out of the way, but we still have Huck. He's got the co-ordinates and he's helping that gang," Sharleen says.

Mick snorts. "Don't you worry about Huck. He'll get in his car this afternoon for work and believe me when I say, he won't get out of it. No one will know what happened. That car will blow the second he turns the key, I've made sure of it."

Oh. My. God.

Everything. He's thought of everything.

If I didn't come here today...everyone I love would quite possibly be dead by the end of the week.

"When will the island blow?"

Mick goes quiet for a moment before answering. "In exactly twenty-two hours. I've got a timer set."

I have to go, and I have to go now.

I turn and hurry off, careful not to make a sound. When I hit the sidewalk, I run to my car and get in. I pull out my phone with trembling hands and dial Jenny. Praying she answers, because she needs to stop Huck from getting into his car.

"Willow, hey."

"Where's your dad?"

"What?"

"Where is he Jenny?" I shout. "Where is he?"

"I don't know. What's wrong?"

“I need to find him. It’s urgent. Jenny, I need to speak to him right now!”

“I’ll call him. Just hang on a second. I’ll call you back.”

She hangs up and I wait with bated breath, palms sweating, knees shaking, and when the phone rings I answer it right away. “He’s not answering.”

No.

No, this can’t be happening.

“Where does he live?”

She gives me his address, and then in a panicked tone asks, “Willow, what’s wrong?”

“I have to go. I’ll explain later.”

I hit the accelerator and pray to God Huck hasn’t gotten into that car. I speed through the streets, and it takes me half an hour to get to Huck’s house. As I pull up, he’s just reaching down to get into his car with a coffee in hand. I leap out of the car and scream bloody murder, not even certain what it is I’m saying. He drops the coffee and spins around, eyes wide. He looks terrified, and he should be.

One second later, and he’d be dead.

“Don’t open that door!” I yell, heart racing as I rush over and stop before him.

Huck looks confused, his eyes dart from me to the car and then back again.

“Willow? What are you doing here? What’s going on?” he asks, stepping away from the car.

“They planted an explosive. It’ll blow up if you open that door.”

His face pales. “Who planted an explosive?”

“Mick.”

He swallows and pulls out his phone, dialing. I hear him speaking quickly and the word ‘bomb’ is used numerous

times. When he hangs up, he turns to me and takes my hand.
“Are you hurt?”

“No, I’m ok. We have to help the guys. Mick is going to blow the island as soon as they’re on it.”

“Shit,” he curses, “I had a bad feeling Mick was way ahead of them.”

“We have to stop them. How long does it take to get there?”

“With a private, fast boat, around about fifteen to sixteen hours.”

“Then we need to go right now, because the island blows in twenty-two hours.”

He sighs, closing his eyes, rubbing his temples. “It’s going to take more than a few hours to get everything organized, Willow.”

“We can’t let them die, Huck. Please, make it happen.”

A team of police cars come speeding down the street, cutting me off, and I watch as they stop and quickly leap out, all dressed in protective clothing. Three officers walk over and chat quickly to Huck, then they carefully scan the car, sliding underneath it and peering around the tires but not touching it. One calls out and waves the others over, they all lean down and their voices become hushed and a little frantic.

We’re quickly moved away from the scene.

“It’s a bomb, isn’t it?” Huck asks, when an officer approaches.

“It is. You want to tell me how you knew that was there?”

Huck swings his eyes to me, and then looks back to the officer. “I don’t know, I had a bit of a threat via phone call last night. I was suspicious and I just knew something was off when I walked out the door. I looked and thought I saw what was a bomb, so I called it in.”

“Lucky for you that you listened to your gut.”

“Yeah. I have to run, Brad. I’ll come in and make a statement later. My daughter has an emergency.”

The other officer nods. “We’ll close this area off and then we’ll check the house, too. I’ll call you with updates.”

Huck nods and hands his keys over. Then he follows me to my car. When we’re in, he finally speaks.

“Take me to the wharf, right away.”

“I’m coming with you,” I say.

“No. Jagger was insistent that you don’t come.”

“Huck, I know that island. I’ve seen it before. I’m coming.”

“Willow…”

I pull out my phone without letting him speak further, and dial Ava. She answers quickly.

“Willow, are you ok? How did it go? Was Mary there?”

I don’t have time to tell her everything, and if I do, she’ll only panic. I need her to be calm right now, because I need her to take care of my son.

“Ava, I need to ask you to do something for me.”

“What?”

“I need you to watch Cody for me tonight, something has come up and I have to go with Huck.”

“What? What’s happened? You know that I can’t let you go. I promised I would take care of you.”

“You just need to trust me, please,” I plead.

“Tell me what’s going on,” she says firmly, “or I won’t do it.”

I exhale.

Stubborn damned woman.

“Ava, it’s a set up. Mick is going to blow that entire island. Not only will Jagger die, but so will all the guys who went there to help him. We have to stop this.”

She's silent. "This is a bad idea. If you die..."

"I won't. If I can't save them, I promise I'll get off the island. I know when the bomb will go off. I heard Mick talking, and..."

"Mick?"

"He was at Mary's house. All along they've been working together. I was right, I knew I was right."

"Oh," she whispers, "Angel is on that island, Willow..."

"I know, and I'm going to get him off. Take care of my son, please?"

Silence.

"Are you sure you have to go?"

I glance at Huck, who is talking frantically on the phone, too. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. I see my son's face and wonder if I'm doing the right thing. If I die...No, I can't think like that. Mick said twenty-two hours, I'll time it. If I don't find Jagger, I'll leave. I'll force myself to leave, I won't be a hero. I can't be a hero. I just can't.

"I have to. If I don't they all die. I can't live with that Ava, I can't."

"I know," she says, her voice full of fear. "I'll have Cody here safe. Come back, Willow. Don't you leave him without his momma."

"I'll be back. I won't be a hero, Ava. If I can't find them, I'll leave. For my son, I have to. Take care of him, please?"

She knows that I have more than one reason for asking that, but she answers anyway. "Always."

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

I hang up the phone, my heart heavy. If something happens to me, Cody will never see me again. That thought makes me sick to my stomach, but I know that I could never live with myself if I didn't try to fix this.

A moment later Huck finishes up his phone call. “We’ve got a boat. Let’s go.”

We don’t say anything as we drive down to the wharf. When we arrive, there is a car pulled up beside a slick, white boat. We get out and I swallow once more before pulling on my shield of bravery and walking towards the boat with Huck. The man waiting walks over and shakes Huck’s hand.

“It’s got plenty of gas, water and food. Not that you’ll need it, but you can’t be too safe. I’ve loaded it with weapons. There is spare gas, but it should get you there and back.”

“Vests?” Huck asks.

The man turns to his car and pulls out two bullet proof vests. I swallow. It didn’t feel real until this very moment. Now, sickness swirls in my stomach. Huck takes my shoulders without a word and spins me towards him, and then he takes a vest and secures it over my top. He hands me a long-sleeved navy shirt that the other man is also holding, and I slip it over the top of the vest.

“Know how to shoot a gun?”

I nod, hesitantly. “I do, but not that well.”

“Right, I’ll give you the simple one. It’s loaded, you just aim and pull the trigger. Try it now.”

The guy quickly climbs onto the boat and comes back with a small pistol. He hands it to me and with trembling hands, I take it. Huck takes my shoulders and turns me towards the trees. He quickly shows me how to position my arms and goes over very briefly how to load it, then tells me to pull the trigger. I do and it jerks me backwards, Huck steadies me and tells me to do it again. I do, firing the gun repeatedly until I’m not so shocked by the backfire.

“I hope you don’t have to use it, but I can’t let you go on there unarmed.”

I nod, still in some sort of mild shock. I put the safety on and slide the gun into my pants. Huck turns to the man watching us with curiosity.

“Thanks Kyle, I appreciate it.”

“I had nothing to do with this, remember?” Kyle says. “I owed you one, now we’re even.”

“Got it.”

“Take care, Huck. You’re in for a dangerous ride.”

Kyle slaps him on the back, nods at me and then gets into his car and leaves. I stare at the slick speed boat and Huck nods, indicating towards the boat with a hand. I climb in with shaky legs and sit on one of the small swivel seats at the front. Huck prepares a few things as I stare out in a daze, then he gets in the front seat beside me and roars the engine to life. It grumbles a moment, and then begins purring loudly.

“Ready?”

“I have to be,” I say, swallowing the lump in my throat.

He pulls a lever and the boat surges forward. Soon we’re flying so fast that water almost seems like it doesn’t have time to flick into the boat, because it’s moving so quickly. We bounce over waves, and as the city fades and the water is all we can see, I wonder if we’ll be able to pull this off. I swallow back my fear, right now I can’t think about what might happen. I just have to do my best. If they die and I haven’t done everything I can, I’ll never forgive myself.

I wish it were as simple as being able to call and warn them, but only special satellite phones work on that island and they left too hastily to be able to get one. It was stupid on all our parts, really. If we had made sure they had a phone, we could have stopped this from going ahead. It’s too late for that now, I can only pray we make it in time. If they blow the island before plan, it’ll trigger Mick’s bombs and they’ll all die.

They said they were going to wait to save the girls before they blew it and that would take a bit of work. I close my eyes, exhaling. I hope we make it. I am silently praying that we do. If we don’t, it could be the end for all of us and that includes me.

I hope I’m doing the right thing here.

There is no turning back now.

JAGGER



It's dark and this side of the island is quiet. The guys will be here soon, and I've done everything I can to ensure the plan will go as well as it can. I flick the flashlight on and quietly walk through the trees towards the back of the island where I've told them to come in. When I see a faint light in the distance, I ready my gun, just in case. As it moves closer, I see a familiar figure jump off the side and wade through the water to help pull the small boat close enough.

"Ace?" I say quietly.

"It's us. We're here."

I shine the light towards them and watch as they all jump off the boat and drag their legs through the water. When they hit the sand, I move closer. This is the only time there isn't surveillance on this side of the island. It shuts down for the guards to load all of the tapes for about an hour a night, and so this was the only chance of getting them on here without anyone noticing.

Walking over, I lean into Ace, slapping his back as he wraps an arm around me. "Good to see you, boss."

"Yeah, you, too."

"Is it all ready?" he asks, stepping back.

"Yeah, all set. I've wired a massive explosive to one of the cars in the middle of the island. I've got it connected to a trigger, when I press it, all the infrastructure of the island will blow, and they'll have no use for it. It should shut it all down, nobody will want to pay the money to get it going again, not to mention the time it would take. We'd want to be a good distance away before I press it."

“Good, what about the girls?”

“All good, as far as I know they’re all still going to their weekly meeting tomorrow and should be far enough away to escape safely.”

“Mick?”

I sigh. “That’s a problem, Mick isn’t here yet.”

“What?” Angel hisses.

I can’t see his face in the darkness, but I know he’s probably clenching his fists right now. Trust me, I get it. I want Mick gone as much as the next person, if not more.

“He didn’t come,” I explain. “I don’t know why.”

“I don’t like the sound of that man,” Ace mutters.

“He said he had business. He called me out earlier tonight, but I told him I couldn’t make it out until tomorrow. He wants me in for another fight. He was persistent.”

“Well, we’re here now. We have to do this. We can take Mick down when we get back – at least with all his workers here, he’ll have nobody to come after us.”

I nod, hoping that’ll work. Either way, we don’t get much choice. This needs to be done and it needs to be done soon. I stare at the guys, who all look tired. I ask them the question I know they’re waiting for.

“How is she?”

Angel sighs, “Not good man, not good at all.”

“We should have fuckin’ told her.”

“No, we shouldn’t have,” Ace snaps. “It wouldn’t have helped.”

“Where do you want the boat parked, boss?” Rusty asks.

“Drag it up under those trees so that when surveillance comes back on, they won’t see it,” I instruct.

Rusty nods, and he and Bull busy themselves dragging the boat out of the water. When it’s on the sand, we all grunt and hiss as we pull it up far enough that it won’t be noticed. Lucky

it's a sleek boat, but it takes a whole lot of effort for us to move it. When we're done, I stand back, panting, anxiety swarming in my chest.

"Hope you're right about all of this, boss," Bull mutters, glancing at me.

"You got to trust me," I say, but inside, I'm fucking terrified.

They're all relying on me.

If I made a mistake, it'll end for us.

"What now?" Ace asks, plonking down onto the sand.

I sigh and stare into the darkness. "Now we wait."



JAGGER



By morning, we've come up with a strong plan to get the girls onto a boat. We've spread out through the trees with guns and one by one we'll take the guards out. Our guns all have silencers, it's the best we could do. I'm standing with Bull and we're watching the open assembly area, waiting for the girls to come for their break. Even though it's the same each week, I'm still holding onto my breath with fear that they won't show.

Fifteen minutes in, I see a group of people. I shove Bull's arm and he squints, staring into the distance. Six guards and a group of women all walk towards the assembly area. I wave my arms to give the other men the go ahead. Angel gives me a sign that indicates he'll take the two closest to him. I know Rusty will take the two at the back, so Bull and I will take the two closest to us. It's a precise hit, if we injure the girls, it could be a problem.

I raise the gun when they get into the small shelter and the women all sit down. Two of the guards have their backs to me, which makes for the perfect hit. I bring it up to my face, holding it steady, and close one eye to zero in on my target.

"You take left, I'll take right," I instruct Bull.

He nods. I press the trigger and before my eyes, the guard on the right falls flat on his face. Beside him the other drops. The girls all stare wide eyed, but they don't scream. They've been beaten into never speaking or making any sort of sound unless they're told. I watch the two guards at the back spin around and start rushing towards the trees when they too fall flat on their faces. Perfect shots. I take a step out of the trees, without thought.

A burning sensation rips through my shoulder and for a moment, I'm stunned. It's then I realize I've come out too

early. A huge mistake on my part. Angel didn't shoot both guards. Blood trickles down my shoulder and the pain sets in like fire. I grip the gaping hole and growl with pain. Bull is quick and he's behind me in seconds, putting pressure on it.

“Jesus, Jagger. What'd you run out for?”

“Fuck, I thought they were all down.”

The pain is fucking out of this world, and it feels as though a million hot poker have been shoved into my flesh. Sweat beads on my forehead and my vision swims a little. I have to kick on, if I don't, this will fail, and we'll all end up dead. The pain needs to be the last thing I'm thinking about, or I'll let us all down.

“Get the bullet out,” I growl.

“What?” Bull asks.

“Get it out.”

“Boss, I can't...”

Ace is beside me now, tearing into my shirt. He was the eyes of the situation, and if I had looked to him first, I wouldn't have gotten fucking shot.

“We got to get this out,” Ace growls, “we've got minutes, if we're lucky.”

Ace digs around in his jacket and pulls out a small knife. I look away, focusing my attention on Angel and Rusty gathering the girls quietly. Thankfully for us, those girls are doing as they're told. Ace shoves the knife into my shoulder without warning and Bull stuffs a shirt into my mouth just as the agonized scream leaves my throat. The burning pain shoots down my arm, and for a moment I'm sure I'll black out. My body begins trembling from pain, and my vision sways.

“All done, we got it.” Ace says, wiping the blood from his hands.

“Wrap it,” I order, hoarsely.

Bull digs through the pack on his back and pulls out a bandage. He tips raw alcohol onto my shoulder, and I let out a

bark of pain. Ace shoves the shirt back into my mouth. Bull wraps it quickly and when it's over I realize I'm on the ground. I didn't even feel myself fall. I don't remember the last few seconds. I guess I blacked out. It's about fucking time, too. My body was late to the show on that one. Bull hands me two pills and I toss them into my mouth and wash them down with water. I'm thankful that the boys thought to pack a first aid kit in those bags.

"We gotta move, boss," Ace says, his eyes scanning the trees. "Can you walk?"

I close my eyes for a second. I have to get up. I have to keep going. I shove to my feet, hissing in pain. I walk with trembling legs towards Angel and Rusty, who now have the girls in order. I stop in front of the girls and count them. Possibly one or two missing, but we don't have time for that right now.

"Right, you ladies want to get out of here alive, you do as these guys ask." I say in a thick, pained tone.

"We've got a boat," Ace announces, "we're going to take you all home and get you some help."

I scan the woman as Ace says those words. Some seem to come to life, their eyes widening and hope flashes across their faces. Others just stare at the ground, completely broken. I don't know if anyone will ever be able to put those girls back together again. There is only so much you can fix. But, at the very least, they'll have a chance.

"Alright," I say roughly, "onto the boat."

The guys drag the boat back down to the shore and take the women, leading them towards it. That's when one decides she doesn't want to go. She opens her mouth, and she screams, then she spins and darts off towards the trees. Rusty is after her in a split second and he reaches her quite quickly. She doesn't let up and continues to kick and thrash as he drags her back down. Screaming so loudly it's almost deafening.

"Bull, knock her out. She'll fuckin' give us away," I bark.

Bull pulls a bottle of chloroform out of his bag and rushes over. I have to look away as they tackle the poor woman to the floor. She's scared, frightened, and sadly has come to know her masters here and possibly even thinks she loves them. I can't imagine what that does to someone. Rusty lifts the slumped girl over his shoulder and carries her towards us.

Another thing they thought through was bringing something to sedate a person.

Clever fucks.

“Any more of you scream, and you'll have the same thing happen. We're here to help you, not hurt you.”

The other women don't acknowledge me speaking. They just continue moving. God, they really are just broken bodies. There is no life left in any of them. No soul. We begin loading them onto the boat and settling them down beside each other. I turn and stare back at the island, hoping I've done enough. I'm about to climb onto the boat with the men when I hear someone call my name. I turn, squinting, and see Huck running through the trees towards me. *What. The. Fuck.*

How the hell did he get here?

“Jagger!”

I leap off the boat and rush towards him, wincing in pain as my body is forced to move. When Huck reaches me, he's panting, bloody and terrified. Something is wrong, something is very fucking wrong. There is fear in his eyes, the kind of fear that makes my stomach twist and my body freeze.

“What the fuck are you doing here, Huck?”

“You can't blow this island. You can't.”

“Tell me why not?”

He looks me dead in the eye. “Because Willow is trapped up there, and your father has bombs planted. He was going to kill you all. We have exactly twelve minutes left, and we're all dead.”

When he finishes speaking, my world begins to spin.

WILLOW



I can't believe we got caught.

We thought we had it all planned out.

We thought we could get on without notice.

We were wrong.

We got the times wrong.

We got it all wrong.

They saw us coming and they apprehended us. Huck managed to escape and run into the trees, but there is nothing he can do to help me now. It's too late. I sit tied and bound in a huge open airfield, surrounded by guards. We've got six minutes left, six minutes, and we're dead. I tried to tell them that, but they all laughed at me.

They don't believe their precious boss would risk all their lives.

Silent tears slip down my cheeks. All I can think about at this moment, is Cody. I've failed him. I should never have left. I should have just stayed and let these men do what they had to do without me. I tried to be a hero, when all along Jagger probably could have dealt with it and been off the island before Mick's explosives went off.

Once again, my brilliant plan ends us all in hot water.

Dried blood makes my lips burn. A guard decided it would be fun to beat me until I stopped screaming for them to listen. I did, because eventually, I realized they weren't going to hear what I had to say. My leg feels like it's close to being broken and my head is pounding. Desperation overtook me about ten minutes ago, and I started screaming and begging, again, just

once more. All that got me was a few good kicks in the stomach – after they removed my bullet proof vest. Now my head is bowed and I’m crying, big, hot tears stream down my face. I’ve failed and my son will now grow up without me. I can only pray Jagger got free. I can only pray. It’s all I have left.

Five minutes to go.

A gunshot sounds out, then another. I snap my head up and see the guards around me dropping to the ground as sprays of blood spurt from their bodies. I peer around but I can’t see anyone. More guards rush out, only to drop to the ground, too. It’s a machine gun, I can hear the clear sound of round after rounding leaving the chamber. I throw myself to the floor as bullets whizz past me to hit the guards closest to me. The gun is loud and intense, and the sound is cold and frightening. Before I know it, someone is gripping me in their arms and hauling me to my feet.

“Willow.”

Jagger?

He’s here?

He is still here?

No.

No.

He’ll die too.

Cody will have no one. The only hope I had left was that he got off this island.

No.

“Don’t move,” he orders in a hoarse tone. “I have to untie you.”

He quickly cuts through my binds with a knife, and then spins me around to face him. He’s covered in blood and he’s panting. His arm is bandaged up and he looks a little pale.

“Jagger, no,” I rasp. “You should have run.”

“I’d never fucking leave you here. Not ever.”

He pulls me to my feet.

“Run, we have to run. You have to find every ounce of strength you have left. Think of our son.”

“We only have minutes, Jagger.”

“I know, so fuckin’ run.”

He begins pulling me towards the trees, but I’m limping. The guards kicked me so many times in one leg it feels as though it has stopped working. I close my eyes and think of Cody, and his little face. Fuck my leg. I pick up my pace and Jagger runs so fast he’s pulling me most of the time. I’m just making my legs move so I don’t fall. Gunshots ring out behind us, but Jagger doesn’t turn. When something hits me in the back of the leg, followed by an intense burn, I know I’ve been shot.

Pain, unlike anything I’ve ever felt buckles me and I fall to the ground, screaming.

Jagger spins around, raising his gun and shooting ferociously at the guards nearing. The shots stop. Leaning down, he lifts me into his arms, roaring in pain as he does. He begins running again. The burning pain in my leg is so intense I black in and out as he weaves through the trees with me in his arms. We’re going to die here. This is the last moment we’ll have. We reach a cliff, it’s high but it soars off into nothing but clear blue water. No rocks, just water. Jagger curses.

“I went the wrong fucking way.”

Gun shots sound out again. Jagger turns to me, and his eyes meet mine, those beautiful blue eyes. He leans down and presses his bloodied lips to mine.

“I love you baby, forever and always.”

Then he launches us both off the cliff just as the sky lights up with the orange glow of an explosion.



JAGGER



Pain rips through my body as saltwater fills my lungs. I'm spluttering and coughing, trying to get myself to the surface. I can't feel anything, my body is beyond pain now. It's just numb. I surface and breathe in a breath full of smoky air. I dive back under when a huge rock flings into the water. I can only think of one thing. I have to find her. I can't let her die here.

I can't live without her.

I dive, searching the water even though it burns my eyes. I reach out, hitting only bits of rock and debris. I surface again and the smoke burns my lungs as I desperately try to breathe. She can't be gone, she can't be. She's strong, stronger than I am. She has to fucking live through this.

"Jagger?"

A tiny voice in the distance calling my name.

I spin towards the sound, her sweet fucking voice.

"Willow!"

Wading through the now filthy ocean, I call her name until I get eyes on her. She's floating in the water, barely keeping her head above it. She's not a good swimmer. I reach her quickly, wrapping my arm around her and running my hand over her face. She's bleeding badly from a wound on her head.

"You got hit."

"A rock," she whispers.

Her eyes are rolling slightly. A loud, roaring sound has me turning in the water to glance up at the cliff that we jumped off. It is slowly beginning to slide down as more explosions rip through the island. We have to move, or we're going to end up beneath it all. I start swimming, dragging

Willow beside me. She's kicking her legs as best she can, but she's losing a lot of blood.

"Hang in there for me," I gasp, trying to keep us both above the water.

I kick harder, forcing my legs to move even though they don't want to. Willow stops kicking just as I'm out of the way of flying rocks. I pull her in front of me, kicking my legs madly to keep afloat. She's got her eyes closed and there's blood all over her face. So much fucking blood.

"Willow," I rasp, "wake up."

She doesn't move. Panic seizes my chest and I slap her face a few times. Nothing.

"Willow," I roar, "don't you die on me. Don't you fuckin' die on me."

Tears burn my eyes and I slap her again.

She won't wake up.

"Willow!"

The sound of a speed boat has me jerking my head up. I can see a white boat speeding towards us at a great rate. I wave my hand, desperate. It slows just as the next explosion rocks the island. This time more rocks come launching into the water. We have to move. We'll be dead in seconds. The boat stops and Ace leans over the side, taking Willow and sliding her on board. Then he pulls me on, too. I drop to my knees beside Willow, shaking her lifeless body.

"Wake up. Come on, wake up. Don't die, please don't die."

A rock smashes the side of the boat.

"Ace drive!" I roar.

Ace spins the boat around and speeds out into the blue depths. Soon the air is clearing, and the water is blue once more. In the distance all I can see is a mass of black smoke rising up into the horizon. Mick really did have that planned well. No one would survive that. No one. I look back down at Willow.

“Ace, first aid kit?”

“Under the seat.”

I move the white plastic seat along the side and pull out a kit. I begin frantically cleaning Willow’s head, but she’s lost so much blood. It looks like her leg is nearly broken, it’s twisted in an odd way and blood seeps from a bullet wound. I close my eyes a moment, then I begin cleaning her up, applying pressure where I can. She’s still breathing. If she remains breathing, I’ll find a way to save her.

I have to.

We reach the second boat when we’re further out and it relieves me to see they’re all alive. Ace stops beside it, and I glance at everyone, before looking back down at Willow.

“We need help. We have to move.” I say, my fingers trembling as I carefully lift her head into my lap.

“Jagger, we might not make it in time. It’s a long trip and,” Angel begins, his voice hoarse.

“No,” I grind out. “Fuckin’ no, Angel. She can’t die. She won’t.”

Angel nods and looks over at Ace, then he turns to the other boat.

“Get me a blanket, she needs to stay warm. Throw over as many first aid supplies as you have,” I order, staring at her beautiful face.

The guys on the other boat begin tossing things over. Ace wraps Willow’s leg while I take a needle and thread, unsterilized, and I stitch her head. If we don’t stop the bleeding, she’ll die. An infection is the least of her problems right now. She’s still out, and her breathing is becoming more jagged. We don’t have long, hours if we’re lucky. I wrap her in a blanket and bring her to my chest.

“Go as fast as this fucking boat will take us, Ace. Now.”

He nods and I hate that sympathetic look on his face. I hate it because I know what he’s thinking. He thinks she’s going to die. He thinks this is the end for her.

It can't be the fucking end.

It can't.

Not when we're so close to freedom.

WILLOW



There are voices, so many of them. I can hear them, but I can't open my eyes. I'm not in any pain, I can't feel anything at all come to think of it. Maybe it was all just a dream. Maybe I didn't land in the water so hard it broke my ribs. Maybe I didn't get hit in the head with a flying rock. Maybe we never left for that island. Maybe I'm imagining all of this, and it was just a nightmare.

"She's stirring."

It's a familiar voice, Ava maybe. Are we home? Am I safe? Is this a dream? Maybe I'm dead.

God, am I dead?

Are we all dead?

"Willow. Hey, can you hear me?"

Mom?

I must be dead.

"Willow, come on honey. Open up."

I'm trying, I really am trying. I want to scream and tell them I'm trying but my body isn't working. I focus all my attention on opening my damned eyes, and finally they move. As soon as the air touches them, they burn, and I clamp them shut with a wince.

"She opened them!"

Definitely Ava.

Maybe I'm not dead.

She makes it sound like this is a massive thing, me opening my eyes.

“Call the doctor.”

A moment later, someone is pulling my eyelids open and shining a torch into them.

Jesus!

“She’s moving her hands, too. These are all very good signs.”

That voice is unfamiliar.

“Willow, honey, it’s Ava. Open up.”

I force my eyes open again, but they burn. It feels like a million tiny pieces of sand have been in there, scratching the surface for weeks on end.

“I’ll put some moisture in them. They’re likely burning.”

A moment later someone is playing with my eyelids again and opening them to drop tiny cool drops into my eyes. Oh, that feels nice. The next time I try to open my eyes, it doesn’t burn so much. I blink and blink, trying to clear my blurred vision. When I manage to make out shapes, I can see a girl leaning over me. *Ava*.

“Oh God, oh thank God. Honey, are you okay? Hey, it’s me.”

“Oh, my baby is ok.”

“Mom, don’t get in her face.”

That was Jenny.

They’re all here. All of them, except one. Where is Jagger? Why can’t I hear his voice? Is he dead? Did he not make it out? He came back for me. He came back and now he could be gone.

I open my mouth to speak but only a croaked “Jagger” comes out.

“He’s ok honey, they’re all ok.”

Relief floods through me. Ava grips my head and gently puts a straw in my mouth. I suck and the cool water soothes my aching throat. The doctor leans over me and begins asking me stupid questions like ‘what’s your name’ and ‘where do you live?’ I answer them all in a croaky voice, but I don’t care about that. I want to see my son and my fiancé.

“Jagger,” I say again, my voice hoarse. “I want to see him.”

“He’s just gone home,” Ava explains. “He’ll be back in about half an hour, he has barely left your side. If it wasn’t for Cody, we wouldn’t have been able to get him to.”

“Is he hurt?”

“He got shot, but he’s ok.”

“How long have I been here?” I ask, my vision clearing more and more with every passing second.

“A week,” Jenny answers.

A week? God, what happened?

“What...happened?”

My mother sits on the bed beside me, and I stare up at her, shocked to actually see her here. She takes my hand and Jenny sits beside me, too, stroking my hair. Ava stands beside her.

“The island was destroyed, and when you hit the water, you were injured. Jagger stitched you up on the boat ride home. The doctor said he quite possibly saved you because you’d lost so much blood. They got back and Ace brought you to the hospital...”

“Wait,” I whisper. “Why did Ace bring me?”

They all stare at each other.

“Tell me,” I gasp.

“Jagger went to find Mick, he wouldn’t take no for an answer. He thought he had lost you and he was angry, the kind of anger you can’t change his mind on. There was a massive shootout. Jagger got shot again. Mick lost his life. Huck called the police and had Sharleen arrested, Mary, too. Huck has a lot

of evidence against Mick, and enough to make sure the two women go away for a long time.”

Mick is dead?

Did Jagger kill him?

“I want to see him,” I whisper. “Call him.”

“Honey...”

“Please,” I grind out.

Ava nods and pulls out her phone, dialing Jagger.

“Hey, she’s awake.”

She nods a few times, then says goodbye. She takes my hand and smiles.

“You scared us. When Ace called and told us you were at the hospital, and they didn’t know if you’d live...”

I squeeze Ava’s hand and then turn to Jenny, who swipes a tear out of her eyes before giving me a weak smile.

“Hey,” I whisper, reaching for her hand. “I’m ok.”

She nods and swallows. My mother takes my hand from Jenny’s and squeezes it.

“We were so scared. We thought we’d lose you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t scare me like that again. I might not be a good mother, but you’re my daughter and I can’t bear the thought of losing you.”

I smile at her, squeezing her hand. “You won’t, mom.”

The doctor finishes up a few checks and is just leaving when Jagger rounds the corner and flies into the room. He comes to an abrupt halt when he sees me lying on the bed, propped up and awake. His eyes flash and an emotion crosses his face I haven’t seen from him before, pure relief. The girls give me a hug, and leave, promising to come back later.

I nod in acknowledgment, but I don’t take my eyes from Jagger. He’s standing, just staring at me, his eyes glassy. He

looks so vulnerable right now, like he has the weight of the world on his shoulders. I take him in, letting my eyes scan every part of him. I see he has a few stitches on his face and one of his eyes is a little bruised. His shoulder is bandaged but aside from that he looks quite good. He stares at me with pained blue eyes, and I just want to run to him, but I can't.

He looks like he wants to say so much, yet he still hasn't said a word. He looks...*broken*. I grip the blanket and I toss it aside, patting the bed beside me. He walks over slowly and then very gently, crawls into bed with me. He isn't speaking, and part of me knows why – he's afraid he'll break down if he speaks. So much happened on that island, and it nearly broke the both of us.

Instead, he wraps his arms around me and puts his head gently on my chest. I tangle my fingers in his hair and breathe him in. Hot tears prick my eyes, remembering how close we both got to losing each other. Jagger shudders silently, his body is trembling. I know he's crying, but he's silent about it. A man like Jagger doesn't cry openly. I hold him as close as I possibly can. A moment into it, the nurse comes in. She stops when she sees us. I shake my head at her, and she nods, leaving.

I hold Jagger like that for over an hour. My legs become numb, and I can't feel my body, but I don't care. He needs me for whatever reason and I'm not going to pull away until he doesn't need me anymore. After another half an hour, he finally moves. He lifts himself up a little and looks at me. His eyes are bloodshot and broken. I stroke his cheek and feel the stubble scratch my palm.

"It's ok," I whisper. "We're ok."

"I nearly lost you." His voice is scratchy and hoarse.

"But you didn't..."

"I thought...I was sure...I thought you were dead."

I stroke a thumb down his cheek. "I'm ok, I know it was close but I'm ok."

"I killed Mick."

I figured. I knew it would have been him.

I swallow. "I know, honey."

"He begged me not to. Told me he'd do anything. Not a single moment in my life have I ever seen my father beg and look scared. I still pointed the gun at him and ended his life. I took my own father's life."

His voice cuts off painfully. I know it hurts. Jagger hated his father but killing him couldn't have been easy. It didn't matter how cold one person was, that would tear into even the best of hearts.

"I can't say anything to take that pain away from you, I know how hard it must have been..."

"He tried to kill my family and everything I loved. He tried to let my son grow up without his dad. He doesn't deserve anyone's pain."

"Doesn't mean it wasn't hard," I whisper.

"It's over now, that's all that matters."

"Are you going to get into trouble?"

He shakes his head. "No, Huck has it covered. Mick was a bad man, no one is going to question what happened to him, as far as the police are concerned it was just a shootout between criminals. I wasn't there..."

"Sharleen?"

"In prison with...*Mary*."

"I'm sorry, Jagger."

He looks up at me again, his eyes are full of love and pain. "No, you shouldn't be sorry. You were right and I didn't listen, if I had listened, we wouldn't be in this mess."

"No," I say, stroking his cheek again. "One way or another, this would have come around. Mick was determined."

"Well, Mick's gone. The island is gone, and the cops have gone after anyone else involved."

"And the girls?"

He sighs. “They’re not good, but the force has put them in some serious mental health care. They’ll get there... *eventually.*”

“At least we saved them. That’s a start.”

He sits up, groaning in pain as he does.

“They said you got shot again when you went after Mick?”

He lifts his shirt and right near the faded scar from the time I stabbed him, is a stitched wound. I stroke my fingers over it, and he shudders.

“Are you ok?”

He nods. “Yeah, I’m ok.”

“Cody?”

He smiles. “Been keepin’ me up all night. Revenge and all that.”

I giggle softly. “It’s fun, isn’t it?”

He strokes my lips. “Wouldn’t change it for the fuckin’ world, baby.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t listen to you after Mick showed me that photo. If I had listened...”

He cuts me off with a soft kiss to my lips, when he pulls back, he takes my face in his hands. “I know what you saw, and I don’t blame you for how you reacted. I would have believed it, too. Photo evidence is hard to turn away from. You had every right to be hurt over it. But I swear to you, I would never touch another woman.”

“I know,” I say softly. “I should have known that from the start.”

He shrugs. “It’s done. Justice has been served.”

“Where to from now?”

He grins and looks me dead in the eye. “Marry me?”

“I thought we’ve already been here and asked this?” I grin.

“Soon, Willow. As soon as possible, I want to marry you.”

“Aren’t you still married?”

“No. Sharleen was made to sign the papers.”

I suck in a breath. “We can get married?”

“Next month?”

“Really?” I squeak.

He kisses the side of my mouth. “Really baby, what do you say?”

“I say yes, hell yes!”



“ARE YOU SURE YOU WANT to do this?” I ask, holding Jagger’s hand.

“Yeah, I have to.”

We’re at the front of Mary’s house. She’s out on bail because her involvement with the whole thing was minimal, and Jagger was insistent that we speak with her. We knock on the door of the grand house, and she answers only a moment later. Her eyes are tired, but they widen when she sees her nephew.

I suppose she wasn’t expecting to see him after everything.

“Johnny...”

“We need to talk,” he says, his voice clipped.

“Johnny, please...”

“I want answers, and I’m not goin’ to leave until you give them to me. Firstly, I want to know why?”

She closes her eyes and has the nerve to look sad about what she’s done. Like it actually matters to her that she nearly ended the life of someone she was meant to love.

“It was a mistake. I...loved him.”

Jagger gasps and I squeeze his hand. Is she serious? She loved him?

“Mick?” Jagger grinds out.

“Yes, I loved him. We were together for a while after your mother died. I loved him, and I thought if I did what he said, he’d love me back. Maybe we would finally be together, but that stupid little woman Sharleen was in the picture.”

“You fucked my father,” Jagger spits, “When you knew what he did to us?”

She whimpers and her eyes fill with tears. No sympathy here, love.

“I thought maybe...”

“What?” Jagger barks. “That we were lying?”

“No, but...”

“You could have had me killed. You were supposed to love me!”

“I did,” she cries, “I do!”

“No,” he spits, “you don’t. If you did, you would have never set me up.”

“It was because of her!” she wails, pointing at me.

Jagger goes to step forward, but I stop him. “Don’t you ever try and blame her. She has done nothing but love me. She is doing what you should have done. We’re done, I’m done with you. I hope you rot in prison like you deserve...”

“Johnny,” she cries, reaching out for him.

He slaps her arm down and glares harshly at her.

“You are nothing to me. Don’t ever speak to me again. There isn’t a single thing left in this world you could say to me that would ever make me forgive you for what you’ve done.”

“Johnny, please,” she tries, her eyes welling with tears, “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“I could have been on that island, and you were goin’ to let him blow it anyway.”

“I told him I wanted you safe. I never wanted you to get hurt.”

“If you never wanted me to get hurt, you wouldn’t have been with him to begin with. Goodbye, Mary. Best of luck to you.”

Then he takes my hand and leads me down the front steps, leaving her to cry out after him.

Karma is a real bitch, ain’t it?

EPILOGUE

A month later

WILLOW



“Do you Johnny Black, take Willow Barnes to be your lawful wedded wife, to have and to hold, through sickness and in health, until death do you part?”

Jagger smiles, showing those perfect teeth and flashing blue eyes. “I do.”

“And do you, Willow Barnes take Johnny Black to be your lawful wedded husband, to have and to hold, through sickness and in health, until death do you part?”

I smile, feeling my eyes water. “I do.”

“Then I proudly pronounce you husband and wife, ladies and gentlemen I would like to introduce you to the new Mr. and Mrs. Johnny Black. You may now kiss the bride.”

Jagger grins and steps forward, wrapping his arm around the back of my neck and pulling me in. His lips slide over mine and he kisses me with such perfection it melts me. Everyone cheers and the sounds of their claps fill my ears and a delightful feeling washes over me. When Jagger pulls back, he’s smiling, and he looks so carefree. He turns towards the crowd and holds up our hands, and everyone cheers louder.

We walk down the steps to my beautiful beach home, and Jenny and Ava embrace me right away, whispering happy congratulations in my ear. My mother grips my face, holding me at arm’s length and staring at me with a smile on her face. She’s been doing well since she’s been out and Jenny and I have been making sure she goes to her counseling sessions each week, just to keep her on track. Two weeks ago, she told

us she was going on a date with Huck. So far, they seem happy and while it took a while to wrap my head around, I'm happy for her.

"I'm so proud of you," she whispers with a smile.

"I'm proud of you too, mom."

Her eyes well with tears. "I never thought I'd see this day. I made mistakes that I can't take back, but in this moment, you've made me the proudest mother in the world and I couldn't ask for a more beautiful daughter."

I hug her close, feeling an odd feeling wash over me. *Forgiveness*. I pull back and stare right into her eyes. "Mom, I forgive you. I want to move on, and I want us to be close again."

Hot tears stream down her face and she trembles slightly. "Oh, Willow."

I hug her once more and pull back, turning to see Jagger smiling at me with pride. He has that beautiful half smile, and his eyes are twinkling. Huck approaches me and I force my eyes from Jagger. I beam and hug him, then I move on to the guys.

"I love you guys, thank you for coming today."

"As if we'd miss it," Bull grins.

"You look perfect, Willow," Rusty smiles.

"Fuckin' hot bride, kid," Ace grins and I slap his arm playfully.

"You make us proud," Angel whispers, hugging me.

I smile at them all, and for the first time in forever, I feel truly at home. I look over to my son, who Jenny is lifting from his stroller. He looks so cute in his little black pants and black shirt. I walk over, taking him into my arms. It's a proud moment for me. Jagger walks up behind me and wraps his arms around me. His breath tickles my ear as he speaks.

"We're finally a family, baby."

I beam and tickle Cody's cheek, "Finally."

“Now, I’ve waited long enough. I’m taking my wife home because it’s time I got her all to myself.”

I turn and grin, loving the sound of the word wife coming off his tongue. Jenny walks over and takes Cody, wrapping her arms around him and smiling at us.

“You two better get going. The car is waiting.”

I beam, feeling excitement rise.

“Ah three days alone on a beach with no one around, I wonder what you’ll do?” Ace teases.

I grin at him, and Jagger takes my hand. We all walk out the car and smile at everyone waiting and watching with happy expressions. We both wave and everyone claps and cheers once more. We kiss Cody a million times and Jenny finally assures us he’ll be fine and pushes us into the car. I take Jagger’s hand as we drive into the sunset, everything is perfect, and I know it’ll only get better.



JAGGER’S LIPS SLIDE down my neck and over my shoulders until he finally reaches my naked breasts. He takes a nipple into his mouth and groans when it hardens beneath his tongue. I whimper and curl my fingers into the sheets, automatically spreading my legs wider as he sucks and torments my hard, aching nipples. He moves lower then, swirling a tongue around my belly button. He teases and taunts me until he reaches my already aching pussy.

“Want me to play here, baby?”

I whimper. “You know I do.”

He grins and gently slides a finger through my wet sex. I groan and thrust my hips upwards. He slides his thumb around my clit and looks up at me with lusty eyes. Then he lowers his head and takes me into his mouth. I buck and thrash, crying out and begging him for more. He sucks and draws on my clit until I’m screaming and calling his name. He slips one finger inside me, and I explode, cumming hard around him.

He slowly moves back up my body, trailing little kisses along the way. He pulls my body up into a sitting position, then he puts his legs either side of my lap and takes his cock, grinning at me. It's right in my face and oh, it's beautiful. I snake my tongue out and slide it around the head, he groans and tangles his hand in my hair, bringing my mouth over him. He hisses through his teeth as he gently works his hips, sliding his length in and out of my mouth.

“Best fuckin’ mouth, my little Hoover.”

I chuckle around him, and he groans at the vibrations. He takes the side of my face and pulls me backwards, grinning down at me.

“I’ll cum if you keep that up. Lie down and spread your legs.”

I smile wistfully at him and slide down the bed, spreading my legs. He moves down over me and positions himself between my thighs. He wraps my legs around him and then presses against my entrance.

“Want this, baby?”

“You know I do,” I mewl.

“Tell me how much.”

“Fuck me, Jagger. Don’t play.”

He growls. “Say that again.”

“Fuck me, *please*.”

He slides into me in one, hard thrust and I groan raggedly. I grate my nails down his back when he starts that perfect thrusting, hitting the right spot each time. My nails break his skin when he picks up the pace and he growls, a mix of pleasure and pain. His lips are on my neck, biting and nibbling, sending me over the edge.

“Tell me how good it feels,” he rasps, “tell me.”

“So good,” I whimper, “so good. Jagger, your cock is so fucking good.”

“More,” he growls.

“I love you fucking me. I love how you feel inside me. I love when you make me cum.”

“Fuck,” he growls, thrusting harder. “Say my name.”

“Jagger.”

“The other one.”

“Johnny,” I whimper.

“Again,” he orders, thrusting harder and faster. It feels so fucking good.

“Johnny, I’m going to...oh, oh...fuck me harder.”

He hisses and beings slamming into me harder and faster. I cry out as an orgasm shatters me. Blood coat my hands as I scratch at his back, thrashing and turning as pleasure washes through me.

“Gonna cum, fuck...”

He explodes with a roar and his body slams into mine so hard my head hits the headboard. He puts his hand in the way and keeps moving until he’s wrung every last shudder from both of us. He slides off, rolling so he’s lying next to me. He pulls me into his arms and together, we lay like that, happy and content, until our breathing slows and we fall into a delicious sleep.

Together.

At peace.

For the first time.



JAGGER



The sounds of her vomiting can be heard the moment I open my eyes the next morning.

Concerned, I get out of the bed and rub the sleep from my eyes. She wasn't sick last night. Oh no, she was far from sick. She writhed beneath me, talking dirty to me while I fucked her. She certainly wasn't sick. I pull on my jeans and walk into the bathroom. She's over the toilet, naked and hurling.

Shit.

"Hey," I say, walking over and stroking her damp hair from her forehead when she lifts up and flushes. "You ok?"

"Jagger, I need you to do something for me," she whispers.

"What's that?"

She looks up at me and her face is pale, making her green eyes stand out even more. "Get me a pregnancy test."

My heart skips a beat. Did she just say pregnancy test? My eyes widen. "You pregnant, baby?"

"I think so."

Shit.

Fuck.

Damn.

"Where do I get that?"

She smiles weakly. "Go to the store and buy one."

Pregnant. Could it be? After everything? I kneel in front of her and swipe her hair again. "You sure you're ok?"

"I'll be ok," she nods.

"I'll be ten minutes, ok?"

She nods and slumps against the wall. I give her one last glance then rush out. It takes me half an hour to find the right spot and get the test. There are about ten different types, I don't know which one is right, so I buy one of each. When I get back, Willow is on the bed with her knees tucked up to her chest. She has a bit of color in her cheeks now.

“I didn't know which one to get, so I got them all.”

She smiles, weakly. “All of them?”

I shrug. “I had no idea which worked.”

“They all work, baby.”

I fucking love when she calls me baby.

“So, what now?” I ask.

“Give me five.”

She reaches into the bag and pulls out a box, and then she disappears into the bathroom. She comes back five minutes later with a stick in her hands, it's upside down. She sits it on the table beside me and then crawls onto my lap. We both stare at it. A baby? Another baby. A sibling for Cody. He brings such joy to our lives, do we want to chance anything coming in and changing that?

“Do you want another baby?”

I think about it.

Cody is the best thing to ever happen to me outside of Willow.

“Yeah,” I answer her, then grin, “fuck yeah.”

“So soon?”

“I missed Cody bein' born, Willow. I won't miss it again. I want kids, heaps of them.”

“Jagger?”

“Yeah baby?”

“I love you.”

I grin at her and kiss her soft, full lips. “Love you, more.”

“I can’t believe we’re finally a family.”

I cup her cheek and look her dead in the eyes. “Best fuckin’ thing that’s ever happened to me. I wouldn’t change a damn thing. You changed my life, Willow, and you changed me. You’re my moment, you make me who I am. Having this with you is just an added bonus.”

“But...”

“What?” I urge.

“We have had such a hard time. We fight a lot and, we’re just so broken sometimes.”

“You’re right, we are,” I answer her, “but I’m goin’ to spend the rest of my days slowly piecing us together until we’re as perfect as we can be. It’s our time now, Willow. It’s our chance.”

She beams at me, and her cheeks swell with color. Fuck she’s beautiful. She takes a shaky breath and reaches for the rest, turning it over. She looks up at me, with those beautiful green eyes that are smiling and those full pink lips that are parted with joy and says, “We’re having a baby.”

I grin and grip her face, pulling her in and pressing my lips against hers. Finally, everything is perfect, and I have only one thing to say about that.

“That’s one piece back together, we’re on our way, baby.”

Indeed, we are.

Here’s to freedom.

THE END



I hope you enjoyed every second of this series. When I originally wrote this, back in 2012, I never thought I'd spend the time revisiting it. My writing has grown so much since then but seeing the passion I began with was truly a blessing. Thank you to all my fans, new and old, for always being there for me.

My next book – Nightmare – Sons of Silence MC – Is coming in January 2023 and you can pre-order it right now using the links below. This book is EPIC, and I can't wait for you all to read my newest MC Series!!! You know I love a good biker xoxo

Here are the Blurb and the links!

US – <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0BMYCP1SX>

UK - <https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B0BMYCP1SX>

CA – <https://www.amazon.ca/dp/B0BMYCP1SX>

AU - <https://www.amazon.com.au/dp/B0BMYCP1SX>

Dear Nightmare,

I wish I could introduce myself, and tell you who I really am, but that simply can't be.

You know why, of course.

We all know why.

We've all heard the story; *we grew up* hearing the story.

The one of you...*and him*.

Your life was taken from you, and for so many years, you lived as your name describes, a nightmare.

But, that's not really your name, is it?

That's how your club sees you. How the world sees you.

I know who you are.

You say you didn't do it, but you won't talk to anyone.

You won't tell your truth.

Instead, you drown in darkness, letting the world pass you by.

I can't help but wonder why?

I'm nobody, in the big scheme of things, but I do have a purpose.

I want to know the truth.

I want the world to know the truth.

What happened that fateful day cannot be held prisoner a second longer.

I can't tell you that, though, because you'll never talk to me.

You'll never let me in.

You'll push me away like you do everyone else.

You'll sit at that bar, your brown eyes lost and empty, until the last breath leaves your body.

I can't let that happen, you see?

So, I'm going to take a risk. Do something crazy.

I hope you'll forgive me for it, in the end.

Maybe you won't, but I'm going to do it anyway.

I guess I'll talk to you soon.

Love,

Bonnie.

Also by Bella Jewel

Dark Brothers

[Dark Endings](#)

Jokers' Wrath MC

[Bestie](#)

Rumblin' Knights

[Knights Rising](#)

[Knights Fury.](#)

[Knights Lady.](#)

[Knights Burden](#)

Sons Of Silence

[Nightmare](#) (Coming Soon)

Standalone

[Amore - Boxed Set](#)

[Wild Child](#)